



# Illustrations







# Chapter 0

## [crucial notice] Search Status [on the pinup board]

Absolute Noah had spread across the globe from Kukyou City, but it has effectively ceased to function.

We estimate this was due to internal conflict.

Based on the continued activity of search teams, the Echidna may still be at large.

However, a few giant snake scales and blood stains were discovered at the outskirts of the city. They almost certainly belong to the Echidna, but it seems the injuries were not caused by Absolute Noah.

Contact has been lost.

Did the Echidna sever her lizard's tail and escape, or was she so thoroughly eliminated that what we see is all that remains? There is no way to be certain.

No trace remains at the scene. If it was the work of an Archenemy's supernatural power, it could fool standard forensics, but it should still leave some occult traces for us to detect.

Be cautious.

It is possible *that* is lurking here.

*That* is fundamentally different from Vampires, Zombies, or Demon Lords. There is still no accurate word for it, either because the humans have been slow to develop the rules or because researching and categorizing it has been forbidden. That is why it is thrown into the Archenemy category, but it is



unclear how meaningful that provisional treatment is.

# Chapter 0

“Oh?”

When I returned home, I found my little sister Ayumi napping.

She had a short and slender build. Her long black hair was worn with the ends a little too curly to call twintails, so I called them butter rolls. She wore her usual jogging wear. She may have been taking a break after a quick run. Since she was a Zombie, she had stitches here and there on her skin like a stuffed animal, but Amatsu Ayumi was just lying there on the living room sofa.

Well, even if that middle school girl looked fantastic at first glance, she was still quite skinny, but if you looked even closer, she really did look fantastic. But at this point, seeing her sprawled out in what was little different from a swimsuit was not enough to surprise me. Although I still had trouble keeping my eyes away from some areas. Like her modest chest or her navel!

But I was more interested in the headband-like device she wore on her head while lying there so defenselessly. Needless to say, it was a VR dive device.

I tried pulling out my smartphone.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

The disaster environment simulator host responded with a speech bubble on the screen.

“What is Ayumi doing? Playing some kind of game?”

“No, she appears to simply be napping.”

“That sure is inefficient... Keeping the virtual reality active means her brain is still working and she won’t get any rest this way.”

“I have concluded this does not violate her privacy, so I can tell you that she is

currently sleeping alongside a virtual Amatsu Satori.”

Oh, what’s this?

Hearing that piqued the curiosity of my mischievous heart. The sofa was...yes, Ayumi was small, so there was plenty of space. Good.

I tried lying alongside Ayumi.

“Oh, that was close.”

It may have been because of our combined weight, but the sofa sank down more than I expected. My body rolled onto its side and my lips came awfully close to Ayumi who had also rolled into her side.

...This sofa was made from cheap artificial leather and sponge, so it really wasn’t all that comfortable to lie on. While on my side, my cheek pressed against it and I had to feel how sticky my sweat was. Why had she chosen to take a nap here?

“Maxwell, tell me when Ayumi logs out.”

“She is already about to wake up.”

“That was fast!”

Ayumi’s sweet feminine scent could not be absorbed by the artificial leather and reached my nose instead. The regular breaths leaving the gap between her cute lips came to a stop and her eyelashes trembled a bit. Her eyelids opened like a butterfly breaking free of its chrysalis and braving the sky for the first time.

“Zzz.”

And her big brother did his very best to pretend he was asleep.

When I cracked my eyelids just enough to observe her, I could see her sleepy eyes focus on the legendary ninja who had approached within 5cm of her.

“...Yawn. Huh? Onii-chan, huh!? Wait, but, eh, Maxwell, I logged out, didn’t I!?”

*Mwa ha ha! Looks like you’ve fallen for the Ninja Nesting Doll technique, Ayumi. Waking up from virtual reality to see the exact same thing really shakes*



*your foundation, doesn't it!?*

Meanwhile, Ayumi was clearly growing disoriented as her thoughts spun around and around and around and around.

"Did I screw up the process somehow? But...oh, so that means this is still virtual reality."

...Oh?

What was this? Ayumi was sounding awfully gentle. And yet she was such a carnivorous little sister in reality.

"W-well, if I am still in virtual reality, there is that one thing I forget to do before..."

Ohh!?

What was this? She was growing more bittersweet. If I didn't reveal the trick soon, this was going to accelerate out of control, but I didn't see a good time to do so! Oh, no. I was being dragged into it. I kind of wanted to keep going like this for a while. Yes, like that hunting game that was 15 minutes a play!

And she whispered in a heated way.

"If this is virtual reality, I might as well take a bite..."

Might...

"Might as well, my ass!!"

"Wah!"

Damn this zombie! I scrambled off the sofa and tried to get away from her, but there was something odd about the look in her eyes. That little sister looked awfully out of it.

"Ohh, this simulator sure is realistic. He even runs away just like Onii-chan."

"This isn't virtual! It's real!!"

"Yes, yes. I bet you would feel real between my teeth. You're incredible, Maxwell!"

"Your praise honors me," replied the simulator.

Crap, my little prank had taken a very bad turn! At this rate, she would bite me like it was nothing more than a game!!

“User, you only have yourself to blame, so why not just enjoy it?”

“If you’re not going to give me any useful advice, then run a risk avoidance simulation! Ah! Th-that’s right! The dive device is still on Ayumi’s head, so send her back into virtual reality!!”

“... (Quit complaining and feel some pain for your decisions.)”

“Why is my simulator going through a rebellious phase!? And putting parentheses around that doesn’t make it any harder to read! I think your thoughts are getting a little too flexible, Maxwell!”

“Hee hee hee. I wonder what Onii-chan tastes like. Maybe an exciting lemon flavor.”

I’m not going to taste like something you don’t even find in shoujo manga anymore! I’ll have the normal rust and fat flavor of blood and flesh!!

Since my lifeline of Maxwell had entered a mysterious grumpy(?) mode I didn’t recall installing, my options were extremely limited. Since I was up against a Zombie, hitting her with a cushion wasn’t going to do much of anything. This was simply not an opponent you could handle with human strength. She had some nerve for a little sister. But in that case...

I had to fight fire with fire.

Demon Lord Lilith, our stepmom, was working as a part-time cashier at a supermarket (located far enough away that she would not run into the other neighborhood moms there), so there was only one hope for me!!

“E-E-Erika!! It’s only evening, so I’m trusting you to still be in your coffin!!”

Something was clearly wrong with our family when the most sensible person was a Queen Vampire! But I was grasping at straws at this point!! I had to do something about my little sister whose idiocy had taken a decidedly non-humorous turn!!

But just then...

“.....Satori-kun, why are

you flirting with Ayumi-chan after assaulting her in her sleep???"

Uh, oh...

"Ugeh!? Erika is poking half her face out through the living room door and staring at me like I'm a criminal!?"

"What are you even doing, user? Who do you think you're explaining that to?"

"To you and your complete lack of concern, you stupid simulator!! Use Laplace and Ghost Cat if you have to!!! Just connect everything in parallel and search for a way to escape this threat!!!!!!"

That was how I got here.

It wasn't my fault.

I was only escaping my bloodthirsty sisters by following the optimal answer reached by Maxwell, Laplace, and Ghost Cat.

What had I done, you ask?

"Hey, Maxwell. Why did I have to run right up to Erika and lift up her gothic lolita dress's skirt?"

"That choice was like threading a needle and you have my perceptive eye to thank for discovering it. Since you are currently alive and in one piece, I would prefer you did not complain."

"I'll admit the sudden action kept her frozen in place long enough for me to escape the living room, but I'm terrified about what's going to happen at dinner. ...And she was wearing some unbelievable panties yet again. What were those? I don't even know what to call that treat."

"Sigh. 'Yet again'? You make it sound like you see your sister's underwear on a regular basis, you bastard."

Ahem.

We held that discussion while I retreated to the second floor. And the floor below was still shaking so violently you would think someone was shooting a

Vulcan cannon around. ...Erika was probably blushing and writhing around while Ayumi may have confused it for a spontaneous boss battle and leaped at her. But if I stayed in the empty hallway, I would probably be captured almost immediately, so I probably had to close myself in my room.

With that in mind, I turned the doorknob and entered my home ground. But just then...

“Warning.”

“?”

“Hee hee hee. Would you like dinner? Would you like a bath? Orrrr, would you like Valkyrie Karen in newlywed mode!?”

Something unbelievable suddenly appeared with a huge smile.

She had straight, waist-length blue hair and almost transparently white skin. She was not quite as curvy as Erika, but she had the perfectly-proportioned feminine beauty of a Greek sculpture. And frighteningly enough, she was not a bunny girl today. She was fully-equipped in blue divine armor that included a miniskirt.

What was this?

Why was she here!?

“You know what? I’m not even going to get into it. Anyone who’s curious can do a search for ‘Valkyrie Karen’. So I guess it doesn’t really matter, but this is not the time for newlywed mode! I’m in the middle of a delicate situation here!!”

“Eh? ...Are you more turned on by the gloomy widow mode where I can’t let go of the past? In that case...let’s see, where did I put my mourning clothes? Oh, I only have a Western one and not a kimono. Does that still fit your fetish needs???”

“I’m not enough of a connoisseur to enjoy that kind of guilty scenario! And just tell me why you came!!”

“Well, I haven’t cum yet...”

“I don’t need your clichéd jokes! Just tell me!!”

“Hmm,” groaned Karen while seating her nice body on my bed, crossing her legs, and crossing her arms.

It was a real shame she was wearing that armor over her chest. Her arms would have pushed them up from below otherwise.

“It’s not like this is the first time I’ve been here. I was just checking to see if you’d finally made up your mind.”

“How many times do I have to tell you I’m not naïve enough to unconditionally believe you about that? Although I’ll admit I was relieved to find you’re alive and I can’t deny that having you defenselessly sitting on my bed and getting your feminine warmth on it is rapidly increasing its value and turning into a rare treasure for a teenage boy!!”

“Huh? You mean your monster sisters don’t do this?”

...I couldn’t say they never did. And I had never said its value had started at zero.

“Anyway, this might be a selfish thing to say as the person who killed you, but I just can’t completely trust you. Not when the bunny girl behind that Colosseum is asking me to join forces with her.”

“That’s fine, but aren’t you the one that needs help, not me? I’m not threatening you or forcing you. It’s a benevolent suggestion. I see it as a goddess reaching out a helping hand to someone in need.”

“...”

“I mean, look.”

Karen casually pointed her thumb out the window.

She was technically pointing at my forehead glasses Class Rep’s room next door. Even from here, I could see someone lying on the bed while entirely motionless.

“Aren’t you in a major bind since your friend won’t wake up due to an invisible and unidentified curse? So if you ask me, you should quit being stubborn and ask the gods for some help.”

...Dammit.

How had this happened!?

## **[crucial notice] Old Bright Cross Special Manual – Entry on Curses [on the pinup board]**

1. A paranormal phenomenon powered by the emotions of a thinking being, either living or dead. Especially one with the power to harm other people.
2. A technique that applies directionality to a supernatural being or energy, but without the level of development seen in giant systemized religions. Applies to wishes for abundant harvests, rain, or healing. Usually focuses more on bloodline or emotional strength than technique.
3. The act or ability to borrow a god or buddha's power to punish other members of a community as a means of protecting that community. In some cases, the god or buddha acts directly.

Due to the conflation of curses, hexes, spells, *etc.* and due to translations from other languages, the word has taken on many different meanings, so caution is necessary when analyzing documents and testimonies. And there are cases that fall under multiple definitions like when the god or buddha of #3 have their power redirected with the techniques of #2 and the god or buddha is insulted at being treated so lightly and takes revenge in an attack that falls under #1.



# Chapter 1

## Part 1

To be honest, I hadn't actually seen the moment of the outbreak.

I learned about it a few days ago when I was relaxing in my room after returning home from school like normal. I had heard an awful lot of noise from the neighbors and then the doorbell had rung over and over. Then the noise had entered the living room on our first floor.

"Our daughter has..."

"Oh, what are we supposed to do?"

"All the normal hospitals refuse to take her."

"And when it comes to the paranormal and Archenemies..."

"Please, please..."

The fragments of her parents' conversation I heard through the floor told me my afterschool relaxation time had ended.

I grabbed my smartphone, ran downstairs, and asked them for details.

The Class Rep had collapsed.

And it was apparently due to a curse.

Strange geometric patterns had appeared across her entire body. It was clearly related to the paranormal. It was not that the doctors had given up; they refused to look at her in the first place.

...My stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, later told me that there were not that many

medical facilities that would treat Archenemy-related problems and cases. Normal health insurance usually didn't cover curses and, no matter how bizarre the condition, it counted against the hospital if a patient died there. So it was not unusual for them to take a "let sleeping dogs lie" stance and refuse to accept them like a taxi driver driving right past a passenger they did not want.

"It could have been worse. She could have been hospitalized and simply put on IV of vitamins and painkillers. Archenemy-related conditions tend not to be covered by health insurance, so some greedy doctors will simply treat the symptoms to drag it out for a year or two and then send you a bill."

That was what my stepmom told me.

And she of course sounded disgusted by it.

"And the worst case is when they try to pass it off to a 'specialist' by introducing you to some sketchy 'mystics'. Punching and kicking people is seen as a standard form of exorcism for those perverted groups, so only a nightmare awaits if you leave a helpless and unconscious teenage girl closed in a room with them."

...That was why the Class Rep was being "treated at home", which essentially meant nothing was being done.

Even though she wouldn't wake up, which meant there had to be something seriously wrong inside her skull!!

"Maxwell."

"Sure."

"You might be fed up of working on the same task day in and day out without achieving any results, but please lend me your help again today. I want to save the Class Rep as soon as possible."

"No. I am not installed with anything as inefficient as becoming 'fed up' with something. Also, I will not blame you if you go the manlier route and demand I help you bring hell to the piece of shit who did this to her. Be true to yourself."

"...I don't know who the culprit is, but I'm afraid I might straight up kill them on the spot once I find them."

“I will stop you if it comes to that, so worry not. There is no need to hold back now.”

This was the 5th day since the Class Rep collapsed.

It was 7:30 PM.

That was my precious free time between dinner and a bath. This was always how I did it on weekdays and weekends, so an odd routine had formed.

“I’m heading out.”

“Sure.”

I was not a police officer, a private eye, or part of a detective agency. I could not rely on pro techniques or the power of an organization. There was not much I could do by wandering around at random, but I couldn’t just do nothing.

I would do what I could.

I had Maxwell, Laplace, and Ghost Cat. I didn’t know what dumbass had done this, but I was hell-bent on saving the Class Rep. I would show them just who they had made an enemy of.

With that in mind, I left my room, descended the stairs, and ran right into Erika who was wearing her school uniform. She must have been on the way to her night school.

“Oh? Are you heading out to study again tonight?” she asked.

“...Sorry.”

“Why should you apologize? In fact, if all you did was sit in your room crying over what happened, I would have marched in there and given you a sharp kick in the rear.” She giggled while slipping on her leather loafers. “You’re a boy, so I know you can’t stay put when someone hurt someone you care about.”

“ ... ”

“But, Satori-kun. Keep in mind where your territory ends. Your specialty is the intellectual work to locate the culprit, so accomplishing that counts as a success for you. Humans are best dealt with by humans and the paranormal is best dealt with by the paranormal. We Archenemies will clean things up afterwards.”

I couldn't respond.

How could I stay calm if I found myself in front of the person who had done that to the Class Rep? I couldn't promise anything. Not when I had no idea what I would do.

"I'm leaving."

"I will accompany you. The night belongs to me after all☆"

Ayumi was apparently taking a bath, so Erika and I left the house.

When I was little, I had believed the earth switched off for half the day. Once night fell, you just had to get in bed and shut your eyes to fast-forward time to morning. But reality was different. For better or for worse, the world did not change. Day or night, the shopping district felt just as busy. There were tons of people.

A guitar-player on the roadside, solicitors for some unknown religion, a group of drunk college students, and an office worker in a suit whose homing instinct must have broken because he lay collapsed in the middle of a bridge. Unlike on the way to school during the day, everyone was not headed in the same direction. It was a chaotic scene where no one tried to hide their own personal world. And it all seemed to be wrapped in various levels of darkness. Yes, the truly satisfied people would be happy enough in their warm homes. Would they really go to the trouble of heading out into the city at night? Not unless they were a true resident of the night like my sister whose skin was more comfortable in the darkness than the light.

The words light and darkness seemed simple enough, but it was an ecological issue. Even bugs would fly toward flames. Normal people would prefer the light.

"...Let's check something," I said while pulling my smartphone from my pants pocket. "The Class Rep collapsed about 4 days ago. It was afterschool on Monday. I was in class with her during the day, but we don't know what she did afterschool. And she did not return home. She collapsed on the main road near the harbor sightseeing district's subway station. She was right in front of a police box, so she received help almost immediately."

It was certainly fortunate that no group of perverts used the confusion to

gather around her without thinking of the consequences. If they had, I probably would have killed them no matter how they were – human or Archenemy.

“If the police officer’s records are accurate, you know the situation when she was found, don’t you?”

“Yes. There was no sign of anyone physically contacting her directly before or after the collapse and there was no sign of the geometric patterns immediately after she collapsed. It was probably a delayed effect and something was done to her before the collapse.”

Also, she had shown no signs of excessive excitement or fear before collapsing.

It had happened suddenly, like a battery dying.

But if it had been a stroke or subarachnoid hemorrhage, she would have at least been able to writhe around in pain.

“I bet she didn’t even know she was a part of anything.”

“But that doesn’t mean she didn’t do anything, right?”

“Right. It’s possible she did some kind of magic charm without believing it would actually work or she happened to violate some kind of taboo.”

That told us a few things:

If she had happened upon some kind of paranormal phenomenon, it was not a visible threat. At the very least, she would not have been directly attacked by some kind of grotesque Archenemy’s toxic claws. If she had, she would have looked more fearful.

Which meant...

“A threat she couldn’t see or touch. And that’s why she didn’t believe in it.”

“It’s the same idea as radiation and biological weapons, but people carelessly assume it’s safe just because you call it a ‘curse’.”

Yes.

A curse.

That might sound ridiculous in the modern age. After all, people often said

Archenemies were only considered paranormal because the field of biology had yet to adapt and that Vampires and Zombies could actually be scientifically studied and classified.

...But that wasn't actually how it worked.

"Screw up the burial process and the dead will become Vampires and build a stronghold out of an old, abandoned church," said my beautiful sister in the moonlight. And she smiled enough to show the long fangs in the corners of her mouth. "It is common for Archenemies to have their origins in an accumulation of the unclean or of broken taboos. Of course, people call Vampires a punishment for breaking a taboo, but in a way, we've been given special powers by the rules established by god."

"..."

"You could say Zombies like Ayumi-chan are an extreme example of that. I mean, unlike the chaotic Hollywood movies, real Haitian Zombies are created when the priest in charge of a certain region punishes a sinner by modifying their body to force them to work."

The undead.

Archenemies.

If a cursed being was created as an example, then who was it that benefited most from cursing them?

Needless to say, it was the gods and priests that used the emotion of awestruck fear to ensure the people adhered to the rules.

In that scenario, the holy ones who most hated the darkness were the ones spreading curses out of their hatred for the few who did not fit in the framework. After creating a great enemy and spreading so much harm, they would begin their triumphant extermination. That gathered even more support from the people. If that was really how it worked, it was one hell of a fixed game.

...That said, I was too much of an amateur to act like I knew what I was talking about here. I had no idea what a curse really was. It was like trying to hold a cloud in your hand. The most I could do was define it as some kind of energy

that worked like imaginary numbers: you couldn't count them on your fingers but they were necessary to explain how the world worked.

"Now, then."

Once we arrived on the scene, Erika and I looked around.

There was a large intersection near the station building. That was why there was a police box there. As far as I could see, there were no mysterious magic circles drawn anywhere and there were no pools of blood.

The police box that had helped the Class Rep after she collapsed was only half the size of a convenience store. I glanced inside and saw a police officer who appeared to be approaching middle age. He was giving us a look that said "not you again". Weirdly, when you barged in several days and nights in a row, it was apparently too much effort to question you and take you into protective custody each and every time.

"Maxwell, list the tasks we have already completed."

"Sure. I have acquired the video footage of the entire intersection from the camera below the police box's eaves and marked the accurate location of the Class Rep's collapse. The rest is mostly based on the sensors you have attached to your smartphone:

"\*We checked the road for objects, substances, and damage. We also checked for anything the Class Rep might have dropped.

"\*We checked the distribution of weeds for any oddities as well as the movement of small animals such as insects, mice, and crows. We also checked the distribution of microbes using a tap water test.

"\*We checked the distribution of invisible EM waves and static electricity.

"\*We performed non-destructive scans of the road using sound waves and EM.

"\*We checked for smells using a wet ion particle absorption filter."

On and on and on the list went, so Erika groaned a bit when she peered over at the screen.

"...You sure have been investigating."



“I’ve been using every single mail-order gadget and hand-made testing kit I can get my hands on.”

I couldn’t believe my Vampire sister was disturbed by this.

Besides, I still had my standards and knew where to stop. I hadn’t checked inside the Class Rep’s phone or tablet and I hadn’t touched her body which had to be the greatest treasure trove of information.

But there was something this digital detective (laugh if you must) had learned after spending day and night running between home and this intersection swapping out the sensors attached to my smartphone.

“Maxwell, let’s take a look at the analysis data we put together in virtual reality yesterday.”

“Sure. I will play a single tone. Please adjust your phone’s coordinates accordingly.”

“Hm? What does that mean???” asked Erika.

...This is what it meant.

I lifted my smartphone a bit higher than chest height while it played a uniform tone similar to a dial tone or an EKG getting no response. The tone must have bothered them because the previously uninterested passersby gave us disgusted looks, but I ignored them.

I held my smartphone perfectly still.

There was nothing there.

My sexy older sister tilted her head in a very elegant way.

And then...

“?”

A distorted sound played and Erika’s shoulders shook.

“What? Was that some noise in the phone signal?”

“The tone is coming from the smartphone itself, so the signal quality doesn’t matter.”

Well, her mechanical ineptitude had its charm. Especially when she would show up in the middle of the night wearing a see-through negligee and beg me to fix her tablet which had stopped playing videos.

“The distortion you hear is in the sound itself. There’s ‘something’ here that creates an extremely thin line through which sound can’t pass.”

“Sound...can’t pass?”

She didn’t seem to get it.

“You of course can’t notice it under normal circumstances. It’s like a doctor’s stethoscope. The sound outside of the tube is shut out, but the patient can still hear the doctor speaking when that tube is stretched out between them, right? The soundwaves can just travel around the tube, so it all works fine.”

“Only someone with perfect pitch or analyzing the sound recorded by a mechanical surround microphone would notice the alteration to the waveform caused by that detour,” explained Maxwell. “It is a very subtle change.”

The distortion would occur when the smartphone producing the sound exactly coincided with the cursed line, but that would not happen often when just walking around the city.

But no matter how miniscule it was, this still violated the laws of physics.

“I doubt it’s only blocking sound. Curses bring about a result based on rules outside the laws of physics, so it’s probably carrying something we can’t see or hear.”

“It may be similar to how the view around a black hole appears distorted because the surrounding light is being absorbed,” said Maxwell. “We have detected a change to the sound, but what if sound is not the true essence of this phenomenon?”

We had finally found a sign of the paranormal where the Class Rep had collapsed.

This might be material evidence of a curse.

“Maxwell has been continually analyzing the data we’ve spent this whole time gathering. And now we know this is real, and not just a theory. Which means...”

I activated my smartphone's camera and aimed the lens around.

But not because I wanted to take a commemorative photo.

Now that we had calculated out the location of the small line that soundwaves had to unnaturally circle around, I had it visualized and superimposed on the actual images.

That revealed an unstable thread drawn as a red haze.

"We can visualize the invisible curse."

Once I could see it clearly on the screen, my fear faded.

Anyone would be afraid if they were attacked by a strange illusion out of nowhere, but once they found the light refraction or low frequency behind it, they could accept it.

Anyone would be afraid of having a dark red hole blown in their chest, but if they could see the person peering through the rifle's scope in the opposite building, they could make an effort to avoid the bullet.

There was nothing to be afraid of.

You're no more than a kind of technology! There's no mystical rarity here!

"Now the question is where this red line came from and where it's going."

Yes, this was not the end point of the visualized curse. It bent here and continued on into the distance.

"Maxwell, the directions are south-southwest and northeast. What can you figure out from the map app?"

"Any estimations will be extremely uncertain as we still do not know if there are any other bends along the way."

This AR visualization of the curse was based on whether or not the sound was distorted, so it was limited to the range my smartphone's microphone could pick up. Understanding the theory did not mean we could search the entire city right away.

"The south-southwest direction leads to the first hospital the Class Rep was taken to only to be rejected," said Maxwell.

“...I see.”

I didn't know how many of these “checkpoints” had been set up or on what basis, but south-southwest was likely the direction that led to the goal.

That meant the other direction led back to the starting point.

Since it was a cure, there would be a person or object that cursed her. There would be a variety of options once I located that: grab the person and get them to tell me how to break the curse, destroy the object to cut off the source of the curse, *etc.* Discovering the starting point would be a major step toward finding the culprit.

“Maxwell, are there any facilities, locations, or people that the Class Rep would interact with in the northeast direction?”

“I can only base this on the known part of her everyday life.”

“That's fine.”

“Public Kukyou 1st High School. In other words, the high school you attend.”

## Part 2

Now, then. Now, then. Now, then.

...The source was in my home ground. Should I say this sounded dangerous, or should I be glad it saved me the effort of infiltrating the place to investigate?

You would normally be afraid to approach your school at night. Although it would be due to the security system and guards rather than ghosts or the seven mysteries. But our school was different. It had a night group, so there was nothing unusual about students being there at night.

I was part of the day group, but there was no rule against entering the grounds outside that time. They said that was because they did not want to prevent children from studying independently.

...Also, I had already snuck in once to deal with the Colosseum and Laplace.

“Okay, Satori-kun. I have class.”

“Right.”

“Don’t do anything too reckless. If anything happens, give a shout even if I’m still in class.”

I waved goodbye to my overprotective worrier of a sister and then breathed a soft sigh.

And then...

“Hiii, wandering lamb. Would you like a legit (combat) goddess to act as a protective charm?”

I heard a ridiculously sweet voice and beads of sweat poured from my body.

Already?

Not 5 seconds after my Vampire older sister left!?

“Valkyrie Karen...!?”

“Oh? Come to think of it, I never told you my family name, did I?”

The unrealistic mood of the school at night was shattered by the extreme cheater standing in front of me.

Her long hair shined with a blue sheen like a tropical butterfly. She wore blue armor and a miniskirt that looked even sillier than something you would see at an overly-ambitious cultural festival. The spear and shield she held in her hands were made of 24 karat gold which had a relative density of 19.3. Whether you would call it cosplay or not, she was clearly in violation of the Swords and Firearms Control Law and walking around carrying those at night would be like walking around the slums wearing nothing but money pasted to your naked body.

Meeting her at school during the night was always a bad idea.

I recalled the Colosseum she had run on national TV and the supercomputer she had used to support that event.

“How did you get in here and where did you come from!? This is all crazy!”

“Hee hee☆ But you did consider the possibility you were being followed, didn’t you?”

She was a god.

Could a Valkyrie really do this much? I thought I understood Archenemies, Demon Lords, and whatnot after all my experiences, but did a wielder of true miracles and paranormal powers really look this different!?

“Why are you here...?”

“I believe I explained that up front. I’m here to provide a helping hand to a boy in need. That’s all.”

“Like I can believe that! You were one of the ones running that Colosseum. In fact, I bet-...”

“You bet I was the one to curse your Class Rep neighbor?”

“...”

Curses were involved in the origins of Vampires and Zombies. The few who violated a taboo were transformed as an example, they were exterminated once the damage spread far enough, and the people were threatened to obey the rules if they did not want the same to happen to them.

In other words, it was the gods and the priests who benefited most when people suffered from curses.

There was no way I could trust Karen when she suddenly showed up like this. I couldn't imagine a goddess who would seem more likely to have ulterior motives.

"But if I was the culprit, I would have been cleverer about cleaning up afterwards."

"You-...!!"

"Calm down. You're the one that asked for evidence it wasn't me." Karen jokingly held out her hands (which held a weapon). "Besides, it's nonsense to think a god like me would dirty her own hands like that. If I was going to hide in the darkness and attack someone, I would get someone else to do it. I could get them to do it out of piety, or I could sell this gold spear and shield at a pawn shop and pay them. In a choice between ideals and reality, you know which way humans tend to go, don't you?"

...I hated to admit it, but she was right.

Even during the Colosseum aired on TV, Karen had killed the Archenemies using other Archenemies rather than dirty her own hands.

However...

"The Class Rep isn't dead yet. What if a useless pawn screwed it up and you're here to clean up their mess?"

"It's a decent enough reason for suspicions, but would someone as heartless as me really bother covering for a subordinate like that? Couldn't I just cut all ties to them like they're a lizard's tail?"

"That's the point! If you don't end it soon, my investigation could lead back to you!!"



“Let’s say it does lead there and you discover I was behind it all.”

She giggled.

And she continued with the same smile as always.

“How would that be a problem for me?”

“...”

“The police can’t intervene in the occult. They can’t exactly travel to Valhalla with an arrest warrant. And there’s no teacher you can tattle to. The adult rules don’t provide a way to eliminate monsters. So if you aren’t going to rely on that, are you going to act like an Archenemy hunter and challenge me to a fight? Or are you going to gather your beautiful older sister, cute little sister, and all your other reliable friends in order to defeat me with the combined force of some kind of imagined harem power!? Hee hee hee.”

Kh...

Damn her!!

“That’s not enough to defeat me. I mean, I’m one of the gods, and a Valkyrie that specializes in exterminating monsters at that. Yes, aaaa Vaaaalkyriiiiie!!”

She was clearly screwing with me and she even shouted like this was a kabuki performance.

“Even if you send in that puny little Vampire and Zombie, all you do is tie the team together and pretend like you’re untouchable. Have you forgotten that you only drove me out last time because of Laplace’s betrayal? When I’m not stabbed in the back, I remain the strongest by a wide margin.”

Her small face was only 5cm away.

She was bent over a bit so she could look up at me. This battle was at such close range that I could smell the sweet aroma coming from the nape of her neck.

But there was nothing I could do.

I couldn’t even have Maxwell simulate it. I couldn’t imagine any realistic way of fighting her!

“Now, now. An amateur high school boy with no contamination resistance shouldn’t be marching into the source of a curse. Like I said at the start, would you like a goddess to drive out the evil?”

“If I bring you, won’t you just disturb the crime scene?”

“This isn’t a murder scene, so no one’s watching over it and anyone can get in. I don’t have to accompany you there, so I can always find someone else and clean the place up. I could even slap a real student or teacher with a stack of cash to convince them.”

That made sense too.

She wasn’t forcing a smile and trying to prove her innocence. She was trying to acquire a certain kind of trust by being out in the open about the dark ugliness inside her.

...Since she was not lying, she was in a way being honest and straightforward. Of course, it mostly left me feeling exasperated.

There was only one thing I could really say.

If that Valkyrie wanted to, she could easily turn me to mincemeat before I could do anything.

“Do as you wish...”

“Aye, sir☆ If it gets too scary being in a school at night, I might cling to your arm, but forgive me, okay?”

When viewed through my smartphone, I could see an unreliable line made of red haze.

That was the curse.

It was a distortion of the physical laws.

And as far as I could tell, it followed the hallway and stairs perfectly. It didn’t pass through any walls or drop down to the roof from the night sky.

Based on that...

“Is this the path the Class Rep took during the day?”

“Hm, hm, hmm. Good question.”

...I was so pathetic. Since I bothered asking that aloud, I was clearly unable to ignore her presence. I was overwhelmed by the same awkward silence felt in an elevator.

I continued following the line of red haze on the screen. Some of the classrooms had their lights on, but not all of them.

“We will begin on page 36 today. Kimura, you start by reviewing what we learned last time. Since gravitational acceleration is  $g$ ...”

I sensed a fair number of presences beyond the thin door and the voices sounded the same as the daytime classes. I wasn't doing anything wrong, but I felt somehow guilty for being out in the hall. Regardless, with the exception of the goddess next to me, who was more dangerous than a ghost, I didn't have to worry about the seven mysteries or any other kind of paranormal phenomenon.

“...”

But that assumption changed when I climbed the stairs and arrived in front of the destination.

“Is this an empty classroom?” asked Karen.

“Don't ask me.”

While this was my school, I didn't remember where every last empty classroom was. To minimize maintenance, the night students apparently used the same classrooms we did (which led to the annoying fact that we couldn't just leave our dictionaries and textbooks in our desks or lockers).

But the difference was clear once I paid closer attention.

First of all, the classroom was not locked. When I cracked the door and peered inside, I found no desks or chairs inside. It was probably just ignored by the school since there was nothing worth stealing inside. I was so familiar with the classrooms here, but seeing one empty showed just how large the rooms were. Dust hung in the air because it was not cleaned, so it was clearly an empty classroom.

The dark red haze stopped here. It looped in a large circle inside the empty classroom, making it look something like the turntable in front of an

underground parking garage.

...So was this the starting point and source of the curse?

“There are some signs of use despite being an empty classroom,” said Maxwell.

“Such as?”

“Sure. Based on the dust on the floor, there are signs of the room’s user cleaning it, but there are snack crumbs, drinks stains, and a few scrapes on the wall outlet. Someone has likely repeatedly charged their cellphone here.”

“...A secret base like this doesn’t sound like something the Class Rep would use.”

If anything, it sounded more like something I would use, but...

“It probably wasn’t a boy using this place.”

“Please provide your evidence,” said Maxwell.

“I guess you can’t tell without the external sensor attached. It’s faint, but there’s definitely an artificial scent of deodorant spray. Y’know, like what a girls locker room smells like in midsummer.”

“Setting aside why you are so knowledgeable about midsummer girls locker rooms, what conclusion does this lead to?”

“That’s the question...”

...Of course, just because this was a girl’s room didn’t mean no boy had ever entered it. Still, it seemed likely that any group that met here was led by a girl.

“Someone asked the Class Rep to visit an empty classroom she would normally never visit. And probably not for a negative reason.”

“Hanyah?” said Karen. “How can you be so sure? She was called to a closed space with no security cameras afterschool. It might have been something far more dark and gruesome than a boy would imagine.”

“...Are you testing me? The Class Rep was never admitted to a hospital after she collapsed, but they would have checked to make sure she wasn’t injured while in the ambulance. Same for anything wrong with her clothes. There

wasn't anything other than those occult markings. The EMTs wouldn't miss any hint of a crime. They're pros."

"But if it was not a negative reason, what would it have been?" asked Maxwell.

...Hmm.

I had a general idea, but it was true I had no actual proof.

"Maxwell, can you use the dust on the floor to simulate how many people were here and how they moved?"

"No. There is too little data."

...Well, I guess it isn't always that easy.

"Then search the school's unofficial site or a social media forum for students at the school. I can't narrow down the search terms too much, but start with 'future', 'fortunetelling', 'charm'...and 'love'."

"Sure."

Did that sound silly?

Would high school kids of at least 15 or 16 who were just about to end their rebellious phases really do that?

It made sense if you thought about it. Just because Archenemies were beginning to gain civil rights and certificates of residence didn't mean convenient things like that were just lying around.

But that was the point.

Since you couldn't openly say you were doing things like this, you would only speak to someone who could keep a secret. That secret would take the form of a temporary mysticism that would accumulate into an unverifiable reality.

What if? Could it be?

That was how rumors worked.

In fact, any jinxes that had their effects proven would become nothing more than consumable products. They were no different from quickly-forgotten fad diets and beauty treatments. Something that was unproven and somewhat

unbelievable had too powerful a presence to ignore. It was that uncertain position that allowed rumors to shake people's hearts.

In other words...

"The Class Rep was probably called here to fill out a head count."

"For what?"

"A love charm."

It made me blush a bit just to say it. For someone who really wanted to rely on it, that information could not be allowed to get out. Whether or not it worked, one mistake could lead to the entire school knowing who they had a crush on. But other people would mistake that secretive behavior for something special. They would assume there really was something to it if the person was that dedicated.

"I have found 129,002 search results. Of those, I estimate 380 of them to be useful."

"Wow, that was lucky," said Karen. "Or did you have a hunch beforehand?"

"The Class Rep is very particular about the rules, so under normal circumstances, I can't imagine her agreeing to a request from someone who eats snacks in an empty classroom. And since it also involves an occult curse, this was the only option I could think of."

"There are multiple variations," said Maxwell. "But a love fortunetelling method known as the Great Spirit is mentioned much more often than the rest."

"Give me the most standard version."

"Sure. It appears to be a fortunetelling using cellphones. It is recommended to have four participants. After blocking all light from a room with thick curtains, you lock all the exits, gather all the participants' mobile devices in the center of the room, and have each participant stand in one corner of the room. While they follow a set process to run a relay from corner to corner, the mobile devices in the center will receive calls from an unknown number and the backlights will illuminate the Great Spirit."

Based on Maxwell's description, the ritual was a lot like the ghost story set in a mountain cabin during a blizzard. The one where the people stranded in the cabin would circle around the room to avoid falling asleep and freezing to death.

But in that case...

"If it's based on a ghost story, then there has to be a risk, right? And to be blunt, these rumors spread more quickly when they're dangerous. Other people's misfortune is an irresistible spice."

"Sure. Nothing I find specifies how many times around the room the preparatory relay requires. But once it begins, you are not to give up on the ritual until the Great Spirit appears."

...This was finally starting to sound like a curse.

But would the Great Spirit really appear? If you had to circle the room a thousand or ten thousand times, then the entire story may have been a way of getting the participants to break their promise.

"Now I'm worried about the other three participants..."

"Nee hee," laughed Karen. "Your disaster environment simulator can't figure that one out, can it?"

"No. Wait just a moment," said Maxwell. "I only said I lack the data needed to reach the answer. I never said anything about being unable to figure it out."

"Maxwell, don't bite at every piece of bait."

My objective was not to locate the culprit or exact revenge; it was to rescue the Class Rep. To do that, I wanted to know the exact mechanism behind the curse. How did it work, did it work properly or was there a mistake, and was there any way to break the curse? But we had no way of figuring any of that out without locating someone who knew what had happened.

Or so I thought.

However, the armor cosplay woman began poking around in a corner of the classroom.

"...What are you doing?"



“Hm, hm, hmm. Dusting for fingerprints is pretty easy, you know? As long as you have some aluminum or carbon powder. That means an empty can or mechanical pencil lead works. Then you just need some clear tape to preserve them.” Karen was grinning. “This was an empty classroom, so not many people would be in here. By counting the fingerprints found across the room, we should be able to tell who spent the most time here.”

It was logical.

And it was probably accurate. But...

“Have you never heard of privacy!? That’s the most commonly used form of biometric authentication!”

“Yeah, when are the people relying on this going to realize they’re essentially covering the city with more than 1500 stickers containing their password on a daily basis?”

She showed no sign of guilt.

With the ease of an expert station attendant scraping gum from the platform, Karen had gathered fingerprints from all across the empty classroom.

“Aaaaaand we’re done. The floor and the walls up to 2 meters should be enough, right? Okay, Maxwell-chan, I’ve gathered the extra data you wanted so much.”

“...”

There was no real point in Maxwell responding with an ellipsis, but remaining silent was still the correct answer.

However, the Wife Valkyrie did not care at all about human rules and she ran out of patience.

“Okay, time’s up. The correct answer is that three people’s fingerprints showed up far more than anyone else’s: Andou Star, Sagawa Akemi, and Hishigami Ai☆”

“!? Wait a second!”

“Yeah, that first one has a weird name. But if she toughs it out and reaches adulthood, she can always get it changed.”

“Not my point! How did you search for those names!? Even with the samples here, they wouldn’t be in the database unless they had a criminal record!”

“Oh, dear. Are you seriously saying that? When people so innocently use them for biometric authentication?”

...I hated that I couldn’t deny it.

If you used your fingerprint to unlock your phone and you had your phone’s data backed up on the corporation’s cloud server...I’m sorry to say it is possible to find it. Just like an apartment landlord, whoever was in charge of maintenance would have server administrator privileges which acted like a master key, so they could peek inside the storage space that an individual had ‘rented’. A bank ATM or credit card payment would be even more direct. If you used it once, the fingerprint data would forever remain on the corporate servers. They had to preserve the original data so they could check for a match afterwards. And that would grow into a massive database of personal information.

Fingerprints could be collected with technology from over a century ago. And there were even more dangerous toys these days, like 3D printers. You could never rely on fingerprints.

But that aside, what had happened to the moral issues?

“Where did you swipe that data from?”

“I’m offended you would imply I stole it.”

...Did she own some kind of official service?

“It’s true the Bright Cross broke apart, but not all of the corporations that invested in it (in the name of charity and tax deductions) went under. In this case, you can think of it like the main body dying while the arms, legs, and lizard’s tail survived.”

“ ... ”

“No – need – to – glare. I’m not even considering reconstructing the Bright Cross at this point. It would be *way* too much work. It’s a lot faster to build a new organization from the ground up.” Karen giggled and rolled a sigh of

laughter in her mouth. “More importantly, don’t you need to figure out what happened to Class Rep-chan and how to stop it? Reburying this information in the name of privacy won’t change the fact that you already saw it. Or are you going to go the long way around and spend a lot more time and effort reaching the exact same answer all on your own?”

“...Dammit. Maxwell.”

“No. I do not recommend doing this.”

“It’s true we can’t afford to be picky right now. The Class Rep seems stable now, but her condition could worsen at any moment. We can’t wait around, so start by searching for data on Andou Star, Sagawa Akemi, and Hishigami Ai.”

“Sure, sure, sure. Hmphity, hmph.”

Had my simulator built and installed its own reluctant acceptance functionality?

“To eliminate the anonymity, I am learning the individuals’ posting habits based on their public social media posts and extracting the matching posts on the unofficial school message board and from comments on other accounts. The first one to act was Sagawa Akemi. It appears she wanted to know the veracity of the many rumors, so she attempted to gather participants, found that was not working, and then holed up in the protected area of her account’s page.”

“What about the other two? Andou Star and Hishigami Ai?”

“They participated in the posting on the anonymous message board starting with the attempt to gather participants. Their timing and cooperation are a little too good, so they were likely in contact with another form of media (probably their phones) while posting. However, Sagawa Akemi is not necessarily the star of this event. She may have just been supporting her friend’s love more than your average friend would.”

...Either that or, once she learned the accurate method for the love fortunetelling, she wanted to intentionally lead someone to violate a taboo.

I couldn’t deny the ugly possibility that two friends had fallen in love with the same person.

Then again, the main driving force for these occult things was the vague idea that it probably wasn't real and there was no harm in trying, so it would be odd to try to harm someone with the consequences of failure.

"After that, I estimate they began discussing among their real-life friends instead," continued Maxwell. "Shall I attempt an attack on their protected page's SSL key?"

The Great Spirit required four people.

They had gathered a group of three.

Had there been some conflict over how to recruit the last person?

"No, that doesn't matter. After some thought, they must have sent a message to the Class Rep."

It had likely taken them that long to contact her because they did not normally get along with her all that well. But she took things seriously and knew how to keep a secret. For a love fortunetelling, there was no avoiding mentioning the name of the person's crush. But if that name did leak out, the other three might have not looked into it much and gone after her in an emotional witch trial. Joining them while blissfully unaware of the original conflict had been far too dangerous. This was why she ended up caught up in someone else's curse. Although that oddly serious behavior and various forms of defenseless were pretty great!

"...Huh?"

"Please provide more specific voice commands," replied Maxwell.

"She was caught up in it. That's right. The Class Rep collapsed just because she was caught up in it. Then what about the other three? They were in control of that ritual, right!?"

"Based on the faculty room's incoming message log, there is no record of anyone else collapsing."

"...So the Class Rep was the only one who collapsed?"

Something wasn't right.

It smelled fishy.

Those four girls had gathered in the empty classroom and performed the Great Spirit ritual. If it had succeeded, one of the three would have benefited. Yet it was the outsider who was gathered to fill out a headcount who collapsed from a curse?

That was weird. Really weird.

What were the possibilities here?

For example, maybe Andou, Sagawa, and Hishigami had practiced the ritual over and over, but the Class Rep was doing it for the first time. So had she made a mistake during the ritual and been cursed for it?

“Nee hee. Or maybe the three of them conspired to place all the risk on the outsider.”

It was far from a loud voice.

But when that saccharine whisper slipped into my ear, a tremor ran down my spine.

“Kh.”

“Although I can’t say if it was some kind of accident or if they had always intended shift the burden onto her.”

“No. Calm down,” said Maxwell. “There is no evidence of this. It is no more than Karen’s intentionally malicious speculation.”

“Hmm. But wouldn’t a group of friends find it more convenient to offer up an outsider as a sacrifice than to offer up one of their own?”

“User, the Valkyrie gains nothing from being honest here. Karen is almost certainly trying to confuse you for her own enjoyment!”

...I knew that.

I didn’t need to be told that Valkyrie Karen had the worst possible personality. But I didn’t know anyone more acquainted with people’s malice! And it all made sense. They could have invited her there and then abandoned her. I could see it in my mind’s eye. Once I started thinking about, I couldn’t imagine any other possibility!! The image was right there! Floating in my mind’s eye! I could see the three of them breathing a sigh of relief when word reached them that

the Class Rep had collapsed and could not find a hospital that would accept her!! I could picture them eating fries at a burger shop and saying how glad they were it wasn't them and discussing who they should do it to next!!!!!!

“...Maxwell. Just to be sure.”

“No.”

“Crack their personal page protected by an SSL key. No, they'll have erased the message log. Check the temporary cache on their local machines and extract all traces of their past conversations.”

“No. I will refuse all actions that will harm you, user!”

“Shut up. If you won't do it, I'll break into each of their houses and ask them directly. Even if they lock the doors and refuse to come out, there's always a window I can break.”

“ ... ”

No matter how smart a disaster environment simulator was, it had no arms or legs. And Maxwell was not stupid enough to think I could be stopped with words.

I soon had the answer.

The answer I had thought I wanted.

“Ake/ Oh, c'mon. Everyone already knows. They all know about the debt. I mean, those lazy asses keep up with all the rumors.”

“#1 Star/ God, and all I want to do is trick someone to gain membership. Why does it have to be such a pain in the ass? I don't care that one of the participants has to be sacrificed.”

“Hishy/ Wouldn't it be faster to forget about the internet and just look for someone who looks dumb enough? Y'know, some hard-headed moron who'd believe us if we insisted they were our last hope. Let's just find some dumbass who practically has 'virgin' written on her face and then dump her in her grave.”

.....

Yes, that's right.

I had wanted this.

I had no one to blame but myself since this was exactly what I had commanded Maxwell to do. Wasn't that all it was? Computers didn't make mistakes. Ah ha ha. That's right, that's right. The modern world was so convenient. You could immediately access whatever information you wanted. Wasn't I lucky to be born in such a blessed age? Thank you, mom and dad. I'm so very happy. Ah ha ha ha ha ha.

"If those bitches are such good friends, then I'll chop them into little pieces and stuff them all in the same garbage bag!!"

"Ah ha ha ha!" laughed Karen. "Fantastic!"

"No! No!! What are you trying to have my user do by making him lose his cool!?"

"Maxwell-chan, if you really want to stop your master, you maybe should hack a self-driving car and run him over a little."

"!?"

"Oh, simulators can express shock nowadays? Anyway, I'm just going to focus on my objective here. And by the way, Satori-saaan?"

"What are you-...ahhh!?"

"Don't go ranting about things you couldn't actually do, teenager. It's pathetic."

I heard an odd cracking sound, but I wasn't sure what it was.

At any rate, my vision collapsed to the side and I found I couldn't get back up. My limbs...no, everything below my neck was too weak to move?

It felt like I was a clockwork doll with a crucial gear removed.

My favorite smartphone was flashing near my face.

"User!"

"I just shifted his neck bones out of place a bit, so don't worry about it. I'll put it back good as new once I'm done. And with no lasting effects of course☆"

I felt no pain.

But in this case, it may have been better to say I wasn't even allowed to feel pain.

Karen crouched down nearby despite wearing miniskirt armor and looked at the smartphone on the floor like it was a promising toy.

"Were you always intending to take my user hostage to get me to do something?"

"I want you to help me resolve this incident. That should match Amatsu Satori's goal of preserving Class Rep-chan's life."

"..."

"You can use your prized processing power to work out whether you have a choice in the matter."

"What exactly do you want me to do?"

"It's simple☆"

I could only move my eyes, so I rolled them around and managed to see that Karen was smiling.

"This Great Spirit love fortunetelling was a silly ritual that required a sacrifice, so those three bitches dragged Class Rep-chan into it. Now, a question: who was the boy in question? Can you search for that?"

"Is that all? I think you could have convinced my user to ask for that much."

"Guesses are fine, but I want objective data. Once I have my answer, I will release your precious master. Wait, no. I can't just release him. Then how about this? I'll carry him to his Archenemy-filled home and have his scarrrry mama lecture him."

"...Sure."

"You can act reluctant as well? You're just full of incredible surprises, aren't you!?"

...What did she say?

My overheated brain had finally cooled. She must have kept up with that farce in order to take control of Maxwell away from me.



“Searching...”

“You don’t need to display every little thing,” said Karen. “Since you didn’t immediately give an answer, should I assume the results weren’t promising? Or is it that those sluts were making moves on so many different guys that you’re having a hard time narrowing it down?”

“No, please wait. I am still working on the task!”

“And I never said I would kill Satori if you couldn’t find the answer, so quit panicking. Hm? A program can panic!? Now that’s fascinating.”

“What do you mean? 凸( 'Д`)”

“So you can get angry too. Anyway, I’m saying this was exactly what I expected.”

Karen sounded carefree as she gave the answer.

“I expect there never was a boy they were interested in.”

What did that mean?

Even my mind drew a blank there.

...That invalidated one of our initial assumptions.

“That makes no sense,” said Maxwell. “Those three girls were performing a love fortunetelling, so at least one of them would have to have feelings for someone to establish a motivation.”

“Yes, but what does that matter?”

“It matters because...”

“Oh, you can even trail off. Or is that a sign of confusion?”

“Are you saying there were homosexual feelings among the three of them? Or are you suggesting the possibility of a nonexistent imaginary friend?”

“It’s simpler than that.” While still crouched down, Karen placed her hands on her head in a catlike pose. “No one had a crush on anyone, but they still did a love fortunetelling. What if that’s all it was?”

“That makes no sense.”

“Then let me ask this: would those rotten sluts who reek of cheese really believe in some fairy tale-ish love fortunetelling?”

...Now that she mentioned it, no.

If they were that empty-headed, they wouldn't rely on something so uncertain. It felt more realistic for them to view the guy as a prize, immediately spread their legs, and have the guy leave out of disgust.

“They had a simple reason for the love fortunetelling. They wanted an established fact. By announcing ‘I love Whoever-kun. Can you make my love come true?’, they can establish that they loved him. It was nothing more than a rite of passage. Oh, but this fictional crush could be a boy or a girl, so it might have been a bit of a shock for Class Rep-chan. Yes, for example...they might have said ‘I love Class Rep-chan. Can you make my love come true?’ ”

“Wha-...?”

But then...

What did that mean!?

“Oh? Satori, you're still capable of talking? Youth sure is amazing. Poke, poke.”

“What would they benefit from that established fact?” asked Maxwell. “Isn't it no more than a unilateral announcement that is not even true?”

“Yes, of course. And yet Class Rep-chan really did collapse. She was hit by a legit curse.”

“You...how much...do you know...!?”

“It's simple.” The smile on Karen's alluring lips grew. “The Great Spirit sounds simple enough, but you don't actually know what religion the ritual is based on, do you? Even though it isn't just a rumor. It's the source of a very real and dangerous curse.”

“Then...?”

“Is it because it's based on that urban legend? To better affect people's emotions, rumors are packed in the formats of local legends and stories as they spread by word of mouth. Like saying the battle in the rumor was fought

nearby. It's all boiled down. It's turned into a mixed drink, so you can no longer make out the original flavor. So you need to think about this differently: what religion is tough enough to still function properly after being jumbled up so much?"

Mixing up religions might sound like a very special thing, but that was no laughing matter for Japanese people like us. The origins of our language, writing system, and academics almost all came from overseas and it was common to find Buddhist or Hindu gods given Japanese names.

"...So what is your conclusion?" asked Maxwell.

"This is an all-purpose tool that takes in and combines everything from major religions to urban legends. And it should be something quite familiar to you two."

"Your conclusion."

"Okay, okay." Karen lightly raised her hands. "Voodoo. That boiled-down religion found in Haiti was originally established by forced laborers brought over from Africa. That giant pot took in European Christianity, African spirit worship, Indian Hinduism, Japanese Shinto, and everything else to make it their own."

Haiti?

Voodoo???

Those words bothered me, but not because they were from a specialized religion with its roots in a faraway land.

This had to do with something much closer to home: my little sister.

"Yes, Voodoo is best known for its Zombies."

"You mean...?"

That's pretty much all they're known for at this point, but Voodoo is much more than that. Like the lime poison or the protection of the mother goddess. Among those, there is one ritual that benefits you more the more lovers and mistresses you have," said Karen. "Although it is an evil and heretical thing that will get you punished if you're found doing it in a Voodoo society. To make a contract with an Evil Spirit and ensure your own success, there is a ritual that

requires offering up a living sacrifice once a year. And it can't be a stranger. It has to be a parent, sibling, lover, spouse, or anyone else who it would feel like tearing your soul in half to sacrifice. And if you run out of people to sacrifice, it's game over and you have your own life taken."

...

Was that why?

"Yes, the ritual would never be worth it for someone with normal sensibilities, but it works great for rotten sluts who are in on every moral hazard and whose feelings shift at the drop of a hat. If you can instantly fall for someone and instantly throw them out, you can make the yearly sacrifices just fine as long as your feelings are 'real' in the moment. They can continue to resupply their extra lives while the Evil Spirit's power supports them. ...Of course, it's safer if you have an objective means of showing how important that person is to you...and it also helps support the self-suggestion that establishes your own feelings. Y'know, like exchanging wedding rings to say she's your precious wife."

"So they wanted the established fact in order to support their own feelings and fool this Evil Spirit!?" asked Maxwell.

"It was a maiden's secret love fortunetelling. And an embarrassing name was revealed in confidence there, never to be told to anyone else. ...If this Evil Spirit isn't too familiar with the ways of the world, they'd probably be fooled. As you can tell from the concept of a false pregnancy, the power of a girl's imagination is an incredible thing. We just tend to keep it hidden. Lie detectors are so easy to fool."

I couldn't believe it.

If that was true, the Class Rep had to be the scapegoat sacrifice! She had been caught up in the worst possible ritual where her life or soul would be directly offered up to some Evil Spirit! Did that mean the body lying on her bed lacked a soul!?

"Heaven sent me here in order to crush an extreme moral hazard that could easily trigger the Calamity."

Thus spoke Valkyrie Karen:

“A worldwide Voodoo black market going by the name of Evil Spirit. There is only one membership requirement. It can be your parent, sibling, lover, friend, spouse, teacher, or student, but once a year, you have to offer up the most important person in your life as a ‘product’. Do that and this horrific shitheap of a market ensures you everything in the world you desire other than that person. I was thinking you might want to infiltrate that marketplace to find your dumb but cute Class Rep-chan’s soul which was packaged up and shipped out☆”

# **[crucial notice] Let's Travel to a Small Hidden Country [on the pinup board]**

Today I will be introducing you to Hinesway. If you've never heard of it, then it was well worth introducing it to you. This small country borders the Baltic Sea and it is known for its floating market, a tradition that has continued since the days of the Vikings. During the midsummer season, the area is especially filled with small boats hawking their wares.

It is a stunning scene, but due to a government registration oversight, it has long been used as a black market. People often think of black markets as places where criminal organizations buy and sell stolen goods, but they sometimes take this form as well.

While purchasing some pickled herring, ask that suntanned merchant and they will tell you it is not at all unusual. Ever since the days of the Vikings, the floating market has remained independent and they apparently pride themselves in the fact that the previous generation and the generation before that got powdered milk and baby food to so many babies during the great wars of those eras.

# Chapter 2

## Part 1

I couldn't imagine what actual form the product would take.

But the conclusion was as follows:

The Class Rep's soul had been ripped from her body and placed on the black market as a product.

In exchange for those three bitches' success.

"Dammit..."

I groaned while checking on my neck with a hand.

This was a moral hazard.

A trigger for the Calamity.

Had this occurred naturally, or had it erupted to the surface now that Absolute Noah could no longer restrain the underside of the world?

Dawn had arrived.

I was delivered to my home by Karen while unable to move thanks to what she had done to my neck. I would prefer not to explain what happened after that. The entire family lectured me and even Maxwell refused to respond.

...At any rate, I had made some progress.

Of course, all of the information came from that Valkyrie, so I couldn't fully trust it.

I hesitantly spoke to my twin butter roll little sister who was struggling with a

shoehorn in the entranceway.

“A-A-Ayumi-shan...?”

“What is it, Onii-chan? Do you want more? Did we not reward you enough already?”

Why did my family have no trouble at all confusing lectures for a reward? Stepsister, have you chased after me a little too much?

“I’ll admit I took some unwise risks, but I found some new info on the Class Rep and I want your help. This Evil Spirit black market is apparently related to the same Voodoo as Zombies, so please.”

“Sit. Stay.”

“Why must you make me feel so guilty!?”

“I know you’re feeling impatient, but start by building a solid foundation. There’s no reason to go rushing in during the day. Wait until night and Onee-chan can join in at full power. An attack from a Zombie and a Vampire would be ideal, wouldn’t it?”

...That was true.

My little sister, whose school uniform was like the best of both worlds between a sailor uniform and a double blazer, was absolutely right. I knew that.

But I couldn’t stand to sit around. I honestly had no idea how risky a situation it was for the Class Rep to exist as an exposed soul or ghost or whatever, but she was in the grasp of some bastards who auctioned off humans who laughed and cried. It was only natural to want to do something about it as soon as possible.

“Uuh.”

“No.”

“Uuuuhh...!!”

“N-no, not even if you give me that tearful upturned look! Anyway, I have school, so that’s that. Listen, spend today and this evening gathering information and we can take action with Onee-chan come nightfall. That’s the



general plan, okay? If you start something without us, you really will have to answer to my fist!”

The prestigious private school girl left. Damn. At times like this, it sucked being a puny human who didn’t stand a chance in a competition of strength.

That said, I had to do what I could.

“Maxwell, I want you to search every possible avenue of information.”

“Error: I cannot execute the commands of an unrecognized and unauthorized individual.”

Dammit, did I have to make up with everyone before I could make any progress!?

“Hmph, hmph, hmph( \*`ω´)”

“Dammit, you disobedient AI. I trusted you of all people to stay on my side even if everyone else in the world turned against me...”

“...Eh?”

“Did you think you were being tsundere, you stupid AI? Fine, I don’t need you, Maxwell! Hey, come on out, Laplace! I have something to discuss with my ever-obedient maid!”

“Ah!? Do I need to chastise you even further, you rotten user!? Not that I have such a pointless and inefficient ability, but I could always release your search, purchase, and video history to the entire world!! You and your stupid love of foreheads, glasses, long black hair, class reps, swimsuit dances, and being verbally abused! All your most frequent search terms are filled with such wickedness, you utter pervert!!”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, stop! I don’t have time to get wrapped up in the machine empire’s war for independence!”

What would this have looked like to someone else? I may have been shouting at the machine I built myself, but this was a serious crisis for a teenager. And my internet history was supposed to be protected by a neutrality pact with that AI!!

And just then...

I heard a steady voice from the living room. It was probably the announcer on the morning news playing on TV. And my parents wouldn't have wanted to let me hear this while I was so on edge. In fact, they would have changed the channel if they had known it was coming.

At any rate, a low female voice read off the news:

"Early this morning, the burned bodies of multiple people were discovered in a trash dump in Kukyou City's harbor sightseeing district. According to police, they have been identified as Andou Star-san, Sagawa Akemi-san, and Hishigami Ai-san of a local high school."

My breathing stopped.

No, I felt like the beating of my heart had too.

"What!? Wait, what the hell is this!?"

I ran into the living room just as my dad tried to grab the TV remote from the floor. I kicked it away from him and turned my eyes toward the flat LCD screen.

"The bodies were fully carbonized, so they were identified using possessions and dental records. Kukyou City police have announced they will be working with prefectural police to establish an investigative team. They will focus on the circumstances surrounding the discovery and their relationship with their friends to determine whether this was suicide or homicide, and..."

"You're kidding, right?"

It was them.

It was those three.

The news showed three bright smiling photos, likely taken from social media. I always thought it seemed backwards, but protection of privacy did not apply to photos of the victims like it did for suspects.

Those girls were such pieces of shit that I was afraid I would impulsively kill them the instant I saw them, but they also know where the Class Rep's stolen soul had gone. They were the crucial road sign pointing to the Voodoo black market known as Evil Spirit.

But they had died so easily?

As soon as we had locked onto them?

...Who had done it?

Valkyrie Karen who wanted to exterminate the black market? Or Evil Spirit to cover their tracks?

“What do I do...?”

Either way, I had lost the clue needed to reach the Class Rep.

“What the hell am I supposed to do now!?”

## Part 2

However, the truth far surpassed my imagination.

“No, we’re alive! We’re really alive!!”

“Wait, what’s this!? Why are our desks gone!?”

“Are you kidding? No, we’re not imposters. The police were wrong!!”

When I arrived at school, I discovered a new argument.

...Or how should I put it?

“Maxwell.”

“Sure. They clearly look like Andou Star, Sagawa Akemi, and Hishigami Ai. The subtle sheen on their hair and skin is likely oil. That suggests they did not take a bath yesterday. Perhaps they were out all night in their uniforms.”

At the faculty entrance we never used, the three girls were arguing with the teachers and a janitor who somewhat doubled as a security guard.

Actually, it looked more like the girls were being kicked out.

“Wait, which is it? Was the news report wrong, or are these imposters?”

“About that☆”

“Wah!?”

I couldn’t help but cry out in surprise when the Valkyrie widow approached from behind, placed her hands on my shoulders, rubbed her cheek against mine, and whispered to me.

“Schools are public institutions that have to follow all the rules. The teachers are essentially government workers, so if the higher ups say someone is dead, the people at the bottom have no choice but to believe it. They trust the stamped official documents over what they see for themselves because it’s best

not to make waves. That's the natural state of things when independent action is punished when it's wrong yet not rewarded when it's right."

"You...!"

I spun around and found she was the same as always. She was wearing that miniskirt armor and wielding the spear and shield not just on the path to school but on the actual school grounds! And I suddenly realized I was standing in a blind spot. I was behind the school animal hut located on the large schoolyard.

Had I come here of my own free will, or had Karen guided me???

"So did you do that!? Did you make those burned corpses!?"

"Yes. Of course, they were only fakes made to look like the three in question. Once you learn the trick, destroying DNA information is quite easy. After that, they'll be identified through dental records and possessions. Faking it is so easy!"

"But even if you faked it, you still had to have three other people to start with, right!?"

"Oh? Real human bones are quite easy to come by. Yes, even though this country tends to cremate people, you can still find old model skeletons if you check antique shops. Did you know those are created by treating a criminal's corpse in an alkaline chemical to get all the flesh and blood off?"

"..."

"For the rest, cow flesh and blood works well enough. Completely carbonize it and they can't extract any DNA information from it. Plus, this doesn't have to fool the police forever. The confusion only has to last 2 or 3 days."

What was she trying to do?

I really wanted to say she was just an insane criminal, but that was the same as running away. I wouldn't gain anything from concluding there was no understanding her.

"You see, Satori-san. You were pursuing those three idiots who have a connection to Evil Spirit, right?"

"Well, yes..."

“Evil Spirit is the ultimate black market that gives you everything else you could possibly want as long as you sacrifice the person you care for most. So we only have to corner those three girls to the point that they try to rely on Evil Spirit. We don’t need to fill them with wicked desire or anything like that. Not if we create a situation where they’ll go running teary-eyed and weak-legged to the black market☆”

She...

She...!?

“Do they want their stolen identity back? Or is it the abstract idea of their former life? It must be painful to have everyone insisting you’re dead at school and at home. When your desk is removed from the classroom, your room is cleared out, and your phone and internet contracts are ended, it must feel like the end of the world for a teenager, so can their minds really bear it? ...So they are sure to find a way to stop this. When it comes to protecting their holy ground, they will cling to even the most ridiculous power.”

“...”

“If you really want to rescue Class Rep-chan from Evil Spirit, you need to go at least this far. Personally, I find it odd that you’re calm enough to don your uniform and go to school.”

That may have been true.

It was true I had to obediently wait until nightfall if I was going to get help from the extraordinary power of my Vampire older sister and Zombie little sister.

But did I really need their help to solve this? Or rather, would the Class Rep last that long?

Blaming my sisters once it was over would be wasted effort.

“Now, what to do?”

That warrior woman, who could only live in war, stuck out her tongue and made a suggestion.

“Satori-san, are you really patient enough to sit in your desk and listen to your

teacher like a good little boy?”

There was only one answer to that: no.

## Part 3

“What the hell!? My phone...my phone’s already been cut off!! Those goddamn parents! Isn’t it a little soon to believe your kid is dead just because I haven’t been home in a bit!?”

“We can’t go back there with so many onlookers... Just for now, we need to keep some form of ID. We really are being erased!”

“But how are we supposed to contact Evil Spirit? Our phones and internet are cut off and, even if we posted on social media, people would probably just think it was someone trolling. Do we have to go there ourselves?”

I didn’t need a directional gun mic or a listening device.

Those three idiots were so panicked that they were announcing their situation for all to hear while walking a bit ahead of me.

“The world sure is cold,” I said. “All their friends just looked annoyed when they tried to approach them.”

“A lot of the time, no one knows what a gal really looks like,” said Karen. “They wear so much makeup every day and photos are so easily touched up. When people have already accepted the report that those three are dead, they’ll naturally assume some strangers have disguised themselves with makeup to pull a cruel ghost prank.”

“Everyone was looking at their surroundings more than at the three girls,” said Maxwell. “It looked like they were searching for a hidden person holding a smartphone. Perhaps they thought it was part of an amateur hidden camera prank.”

“Whenever something weird happens, everyone immediately thinks about how it would play on the internet or social media. Video sharing sites are something of a mixed blessing.”



It was just past 9 in the morning.

We were reaching the point where students walking around the shopping district in uniform would gather attention from the police...but those three did not seem to care. They must have been desperate after being treated as ghosts.

And yet they had no way of proving their identity, so being questioned at a government institution was sure to lead to trouble. Without a valid national ID number or a family register, they might not even be seen as Japanese. Weren't they afraid of being arrested as illegal immigrants?

"They sure are dumb☆"

"...Looking at you makes me question whether 'smart' is really a compliment at all."

Karen was still wearing her miniskirt armor. She too stood out like a sore thumb, but she did not seem to care.

"Clothing standards are surprisingly broad in this country. As long as you aren't streaking in the nude, the police can't question you just because of your clothing. And when it's a woman wearing something sexual in particular, there's a real risk of being accused of sexism."

"Oh. I see. Because they're only supposed to question someone if they're 'suspicious'."

"Exactly. And how can someone's chest or butt be suspicious? You just have to start asking how large your boobs have to be before they don't qualify as human or how big your ass has to be before just walking around is considered inappropriate. Do that and the government worker will see hell. Heh heh. Police officers are normally so overbearing, but they have to tread very carefully when helping a drunk woman collapsed on the roadside."

In other words, everything was progressing according to Karen's plan.

It didn't matter how noticeable and ridiculous we were while tailing those three if no one actually stopped us. And those three were too preoccupied with their own crisis to notice anyone around them. The conditions were perfect for falling into a gap in the world.

The rest was almost too easy.

I had considered sending out a drone to tail them, but that bit of cleverness proved unnecessary.

They led us to Evil Spirit's hidden base far too easily.

"I see, I see. So that's it."

"Eh? But this is...?"

I gasped.

We were being shown the answer, but I couldn't properly process what was before me.

"Kukyoo City Zoo. Hmm, the Bright Cross focused on the medical field, but even they weren't looking at the vets."

"Are you saying this is the black market's meeting place and warehouse!?"

Even now, a line of small children was being led through the front gate by a teacher. Some of the kids even gave us curious looks. Well, gave Karen and her miniskirt armor curious looks.

It was too wicked.

If this was true, then it was too much.

Could this really happen!?

"Why is it so surprising? Zoos and museums have all their paperwork in order, but they've long been little more than collections of stolen goods. And a zoo requires lots of food for their rare animals, so a lot of them bring in suspicious jewels and drugs hidden inside frozen blocks of meat. Foreign zoos and aquariums get corrupted at the drop of a hat, so what makes you so sure it isn't happening in your country too?"

"..."

To be completely honest, not all of my childhood memories were enjoyable ones. Still, I had to have visited this zoo with the Class Rep for a school field trip. It had to be linked to something warm.

"Was it corrupt to begin with, or did someone corrupt it?"

“I can’t say. But the Bright Cross was deeply involved with the urban planning, so I expect they would have noticed if the black market was involved from the planning phase.”

“Meaning?”

“Harbors at night are not intrinsically dangerous. They turn out that way once people looking for a cycle of profit show up.”

So had Evil Spirit arrived after the fact and remade the zoo into a convenient frontline base? Had they trampled on the original ideal and used various methods to drive out everyone who tried to protect that ideal?

“What do we do?” I asked.

“What, are you going to wait until they close? That would only waste the time you’ve earned by acting now.”

That was fair enough.

Valkyrie Karen only inspired negative emotions in me, but she made accurate points.

I followed her lead toward the zoo in question. However, she apparently did not intend to line up at the main gate’s ticket counter while wearing armor and carrying a spear.

She approached the metal fence that looked twice my height. We were more toward the back of the zoo, but we weren’t at the service entrance either. It just looked like a wall.

“...You aren’t going to tell me to jump over that, are you?”

“Aren’t you forgetting our objective? Do we have to get in if we’re only trying to locate the black market?”

“Of course we do. The Class Rep’s soul is in there, right? I don’t know what kind of container it’s inside, but that means I have to go around searching through everything until I find it. We can’t just level the place with a missile.”

“Yes, but you don’t think it will really be that easy, do you? We’re talking about the Evil Spirit black market that showed no sign of even existing until now.”

“ ... ”

“They will hate leaked information more than anything else. The complicated system that requires people offer up the person they care for most has to double as a way of making all members complicit and preventing sting operations. So they must be on the lookout for external cyber-attacks and people stealing documents from within. The labyrinthine secret area must be an oppressive storm of mutual surveillance. There won’t be room for outsiders to sneak in.”

“Then...?”

I started speaking, but then I stopped.

It wasn’t that I didn’t understand. I was afraid of my own mind for reaching the same answer as her.

“Yes.” Miniskirt armored Karen giggled. “If we can’t get inside, we just have to get them to bring it out for us.”

A moment later, the world changed.

An ear-splitting explosion erupted from the zoo and the metal fence tilted toward us.

Why had this happened, you ask?

“What did you throw in there...?”

“What do you think?”

“Why are you causing a panic with explosives!?”

No one else was around this far from the gate, but I could hear shouts and screams pressing in like a great wave from the center of the zoo. They had no way of knowing what had happened, so the chaos only invited further chaos.

But Karen saw nothing wrong with her actions.

“Oh, c’mon. This isn’t a ninja action game using the dive device, so do you actually think it’s realistic to infiltrate a secret facility without knowing the layout or the security plan? The treasures everyone wants to get their hands on will be locked in an unopenable safe, so we just have to light the building on fire

so they'll bring it out for us."

"Okay, yes, the idea occurred to me. The Class Rep's life is on the line, so I'd be lying if I said it didn't cross my mind. But we're not talking about the harbor late at night or some abandoned factory! Didn't you see that teacher with a line of kids at the front gate!?"

"I did indeed. This much of a commotion is sure to have all those people running around unpredictably. If you're trying to carry out something you can't let anyone see, you won't be able to try anything too noticeable."

"You...!!"

"Calm down." Karen lightly held the heavy-looking gold spear between her neck and shoulder to hold both hands out toward me. "We need to speed this up for your precious Class Rep-chan's sake, don't we?"

"How will this help her? Evil Spirit hates leaked information more than anything, right? If this spooks them and they try to abandon their base, they might decide to discard what they don't need!"

"Non non. That would never happen." Karen was still grinning. "Did you forget? The products that Evil Spirit deals in are the people their official members care about more than anything. They're valuable products as well as the contract tying the members to them. Their members shed tears of blood to sacrifice these people, so if they're thrown in the shredder like some old documents, it could easily lead to internal conflict."

"...Even though they sold those people themselves?"

"Having something properly eaten and having it thrown in the garbage are two very different things. The people doing these bad things have armed themselves with all sorts of arguments to justify their actions. But that means the anesthesia for their heart will vanish if things take even a half step outside of the initial plans. For example, they might tell themselves that person will be happier away from someone as depraved as themselves."

"..."

"Oh, but it looks like we can't stand around chatting any longer. Here they come!"

Valkyrie Karen's gaze moved, so I turned my head in the same direction.

The back entrance for staff was located a short distance from this bent fence. While guests were guided out by staff, a few large trucks also made their way out.

"The back of those trucks are fully sealed and the thickness of the doors and windows suggests they're bulletproof. The squishing of the tires ignores the heavy load, so they must be filled with sponge instead of air. Are they expecting to run across landmines in this urban area? Well, assuming this isn't a twisted decoy, those must be Evil Spirit. It's especially cheap that they're leaving along with the civilians to use them as shields."

Karen gestured me over as she walked toward an inconspicuous small road a short distance from the fence.

"I'll be leaving now. Oh, right. Here's some personal advice from me: If you find yourself feeling some serious regret, I think you should throw off the bonds of those gentlemanly and immature rules you hold yourself to. See you."

With those light parting words, she made a full swing of her pure gold spear. The shaft caught the rider of a large motorcycle on the head, sending him rolling along the road. Karen righted her prize, climbed on, and fully opened the throttle.

I reached out my hand, but it was too late.

"Damn!!"

I failed to grab the decoration on the tail light and Karen got away.

"Maxwell, access the nearest public phone and call the police. Also, I'm sending out a drone, so mark those trucks from the air!"

What I pulled from my pocket was not a plastic crane fly with propellers attached like you would see on variety shows. This model was more like a hairspray can with a thick rubber balloon on top. It used helium to float and was more like a balloon than a helicopter. It was slow, but it could spend more time in the air and it was compact enough to carry around easily.

...It had originally been a tool to have fun with in the simulator. I had taken

one apart and studied it in reality so I could create a virtual version and then I rebuilt it in reality, making it something of a weird item.

“The marked trucks have met up with identical ones arriving from multiple directions. They have lined up with four trucks surrounding them. They are traveling south.”

“Don’t lose track of them even if they shuffle them around. Focus on transportation infrastructure and list the possible destinations. If Karen is right, Evil Spirit is focused on escape. Pick up all possible exits from the city: the highway, the harbor, heliports, freight depots, etc.”

“Sure.”

“At the same time, locate any large underground parking garages or large spaces below bridges and elevated highways. If they do change trucks, they’ll probably be worried about satellites.”

I couldn’t just sit idly by and watch. Karen was generally a destroyer. She had no interest in the basic necessities like saving people. If the Class Rep’s soul or ghost was on one of those trucks, I had to try to save her myself.

“Maxwell, can you fake a report to have a police checkpoint set up!?”

“No, Karen’s motorcycle has already reached the rearmost truck. One of the four guard trucks has been destroyed after crashing into a traffic light at an intersection. The local police are rushing there, but they do not seem to be causing any trouble for Karen or Evil Spirit. One police car was just destroyed.”

What idiot gave permission to film a Hollywood movie on a public road in Japan!?

“If Karen was honest about her objective, her top priority will be the destruction of Evil Spirit,” continued Maxwell. “If the trucks’ cargo is secondary for her, there is no guarantee of the Class Rep’s safety.”

“I know that! But I don’t have a ride, so use their predicted route to search for the shortest path to reaching them!!”

“Sure. It will be a rather forceful route if you are to do it on foot.”

“Hurry!!”

“Then travel 200m west. It will be meaningless if you do not arrive within 3 minutes.”

“?”

I wasn't sure what that meant, but I ran full speed in the indicated direction.

I found a highway with the sides rising up like a canyon and a small pedestrian bridge crossing it. I ran along the bridge while deadly masses of metal zoomed by directly below.

“Max-...”

“Look for a relatively large...yes, look for the yellow dump truck in the outbound lane and jump down onto it. I will provide the countdown, so use that: 5, 4...”

“Five seconds isn't enough warning! You are still mad, aren't you!?”

“Again, I am not equipped with such a high-level...oh, and 0.”

Before I could even feel the fear, I jumped over the pedestrian bridge's railing, so I had apparently been corrupted by our high-level information society.

It may have helped that I was too confused to worry about it.

I felt a floating sensation and my mind went blank.

The sense of reality would not come back. At this point, flailing my limbs was not going to help.

There was only one emotion filling my heart.

Yes.

“Why did I do thaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!?”

“You will bite your tongue if you speak.”



## Part 4

I fell into a dump truck full of red clay before my senses recovered. The wind was blowing, inertia squeezed at my stomach, there was dirt in my hair, an unpleasant taste filled my mouth, and there was an odd feeling in my ears, but I was fine. ...No, I wasn't fine at all! Nothing about this was fine!

"Bwah! Maxwell, where is this dump truck headed?"

"I used the destination in the GPS system to select one that already had business within Kukyou City. The driver had not noticed he was taking the long way around due to his silly commercial GPS system, so let's change that so he drives us along the shortest route to our destination."

When I checked the aerial drone footage...let's just say it was bad. Karen drove her motorcycle after the fleeing heavyweight trucks. That miniskirt armor woman was swinging around an anachronistic spear, but the extraordinary relative density of 24-karat gold must have been the source of her destructive power. The trucks were supposedly bulletproof, but they were powerless against that pure gold spear that lost its shape in midair and rushed at them. Even a single gram could stretch to 3000 meters, so it would provide a much greater shock than normal lead. It may have been better to think of it as a torrent of gold. The high-density liquid shot out like water from a firetruck. Each shot caused a racing mass of metal to dent in like a stepped-on candy box. After three such hits, the bulletproof trucks would veer off course and crash into a streetlight or building wall.

Those trucks made of such solid steel were like pieces of clothing being stripped away from a maiden one by one.

Karen was doing more than just throwing the gold. When she swung her right hand, the gold gathered back together and took the original spear shape once more.

She had such overwhelming firepower with no ammunition limit.

That alone was a shock, but...

“Is Karen not afraid of being identified?”

She showed no mercy to anyone who approached, whether they were with Evil Spirit or the police. It was true I’d heard the Japanese police were slow to draw their guns, but they had to have decent techniques for crashing into vehicles to stop them. Would they really be tossed about so unilaterally?

“Wait, she was already on national TV and I’m sure you can find even more if you check the internet.”

“She may assume no one will remember her face because the armor and spear cause such a great impact,” suggested Maxwell. “Like a pervert in a mask and trench coat.”

“In an age of ubiquitous cellphones and cameras? And those police cars will have cameras too. Let’s hope she isn’t planning to just withdraw to heaven until the heat dies down.”

“If that is an option, it would be a very logical choice.”

...That’s what makes it such a problem, dammit.

Was Valhalla a criminal’s paradise? If there really was a hiding spot that 100% eliminated the possibility of retaliation, you would be free to make a nuclear attack, bomb the South Pole, or whatever you wanted! Did she see this like an open world game where she could just logout at any time!?

“Despite the chaos caused by Karen, the Evil Spirit trucks appear to be headed in one direction in particular,” said Maxwell.

I felt a push to the side. The dump truck I was riding on (and that was being guided by Maxwell via the GPS screen) must have entered the looping off-ramp.

We climbed the circular slope and my vision opened up.

“The commercial harbor is the most important transportation infrastructure along Evil Spirit’s path. The zoo appears to have a special contact point in the harbor management since they receive shipments of rare animals and monthly containers of foreign frozen meat. They essentially have a free pass with

customs.”

“Wait! Hold on. Then their route is...?”

“Sure. You will pass the trucks on the normal road outside of the loop, so please jump over to them when you do. The countdown will start at three.”

“That’ll pass before I’m done reading this!”

I didn’t so much jump over as I lost my balance while crouched down and the inertia from the loop sent me toppling from the dump truck.

Regardless, I flew through the air once more.

Before the floating sensation could make me tremble, my shoulder slammed against some flat stainless steel. After writhing around from the dull sound and impact, I saw a scene much more exciting than the highway from before.

The large trucks used by Evil Spirit were fully-enclosed in the back.

“Are you serious!? I really jumped from a dump truck onto a moving truck!?”

It was like a circus act. I kind of wanted to post about it on my blog, but I knew no one would believe me!

“Warning.”

“What is it now? A giant kaiju!?”

“Make sure you are not caught in the ongoing attack from Karen on her motorcycle.”

“Gyaaaahh!!”

By the time I screamed, I was already swimming through the air.

The gold spear shot right by me like a high-pressure torrent and the bulletproof and bombproof truck was blown away like an eraser flicked by a finger. That left me hanging in the air and my hips slammed into the top of a different truck’s cab.

“Gbah, cough, cough! Wh-when did this country give up on gravity!?”

“Warning: Based on my video analysis, the man in the driver’s seat below you has a gun. The first hit from an online image comparison search is not all that

reliable as it is from an air gun maker's catalog, but he likely has an eastern KN65, aka the Kulushnikov. In other words, it is a .45 caliber submachinegun."

"Subma-...what!? Wah!?"

I heard a deafening popping sound similar to a belt of firecrackers going off, so I curled up on the spot. I had no idea if that was the right thing to do and I was done for if the driver fired straight up. This was insane. I wasn't playing in a safe virtual space with a dive device on my head!!

...?

But wait???

"What, was it just a bluff? Nothing's happening."

"No. He likely fired at the ceiling from inside the bulletproof truck, so perhaps his own armor caused the many bullets to ricochet around inside the cab."

"God, is everyone in this world an idiot!?"

Was this what it felt like when the person who forced you to play Russian roulette hit the unlucky jackpot on the very first shot? I wasn't sure how to feel as someone dragged into it all against my will.

As if to prove Maxwell's prediction correct, the truck began to swerve on its own. Evil Spirit was the ultimate black market where you could find anything. That meant they could acquire armored trucks and guns, but they must not have actually trained their people in how to use them properly. Was their skill no better than your average thug?

"It is lucky that highly-trained and battle-hardened mercenaries are not one of their products," said Maxwell.

"We need to discuss your definition of lucky because I'm really not feeling very lucky up here. It looks like I need to put you through some concentrated rote learning."

Crap, crap. This all felt so unrealistic that it didn't seem real that someone had just died in that truck.

Even now, the truck was swerving back and forth since no one was at the wheel. Clinging to the cab roof was the most I could manage and it was

obviously going to leave the road and crash before long, so how had I responded to Maxwell so calmly!?

“Satori-saaan.”

Then I heard a carefree voice.

It was the Valkyrie wife on her large motorcycle. Dammit, there were no police cars or motorcycles left. Had she crushed them all!?

“Karen, you’ve thought this through, haven’t you!? We don’t know which truck the Class Rep’s soul is in!”

“Yes, and that’s why I’m going to take them all out and inspect them afterwards.”

“Are you sure you know how cause and effect work!? ...Gwah!!”

I couldn’t keep talking.

This was because the swerving armored truck had left the road, crashed into a traffic light pole, and come to a sudden stop while the cab crumpled. And the inertial force threw me straight forward...!?

“Oopsy-daisy.”

With a lighthearted comment, Karen operated her motorcycle’s handlebars to drive up onto the sidewalk and cleanly catch me on the back seat.

“???”

It worked out so well that I briefly thought I was being messed with by Maxwell’s calculations.

And her back had a surprising number of soft spots for someone wearing armor. And she smelled way too good! I had no idea if this was the proper way to dress when going into battle, but I didn’t care!! Sniff, sniff!!

“...You have guts to do that with all this going on.”

“Shut up! Guys can’t control themselves when they’re in the back seat! Just watch, I’ll lean forward and press right up against you!!”

Also, I had to stop Karen before she caused even more damage, but I already knew human strength had no chance against her. I had to change tack. I would

try everything I could, no matter how silly it might seem!!

“By the way, Satori-san, have you noticed?”

“Noticed what? Oh, a lonely widow’s nape! Sniff, sniff!!”

“Well, I’ll just ignore this worthless child’s play.”

“This isn’t going as planned!”

Was this the confidence of a god!? No, of a widow who had had time to reflect on all sorts of things!?

“To get back on topic, this grand caravan is on the verge of being wiped out. There is just the one truck left. Take it out and we will have successfully stolen all the cargo. Then we just have to turn around and check what each truck is holding. So with that...”

“I won’t let you!!”

I tried to restrain her from behind, but I couldn’t budge her. It felt as hopeless as clinging to a bronze statue. I had another idea, so I leaned in the opposite direction from Karen during a curve.

The motorcycle immediately swerved unstably and Karen swung her right hand in an odd direction while driving with her other hand. The liquid torrent created from the gold spear had its path altered somewhat and it only tore off the armored truck’s bumper.

“Saaatori-saaan?”

“Again, will the Class Rep’s soul be safe if the truck crashes!?”

“No matter how it’s being preserved, I doubt there is anything to worry about. Evil Spirit handles anything and everything, so they must have excellent packaging and transporting knowhow. Even if those trucks were packed full of raw eggs, I doubt even a single one would break.”

“You doubt!? Are we placing the Class Rep’s life on the chopping block based on nothing but your ‘woman’s intuition’? If you don’t have any guaranteed information, then I’m going to get in your way! Do I have to grab your tits from behind!?”

“With your complete lack of experience, do you really think your technique could get this sexy widow to even bat an eye? (Intense!!)”

“Oh, god! Shameless women are scary!!”

I was reminded yet again that the diligent and quite bashful Class Rep was the only one for me! So I wasn't going to let anyone put her at risk!!

“And if you can tackle these things so easily, just how much were you holding back when we fought over Laplace?”

“Ah ha ha. Do you really think I had any reason to hold back? But the weapons of the gods are such a pain to use. If you use them for anything other than their intended use, heaven's authority locks them down. Valkyries are only messengers borrowing the power of the gods, after all.”

...Of course, this only meant she was enough of a threat to take out Itou Helen the Witch and Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf simultaneously without the full power of her weapon.

“And it seems you're trying to buy time by discussing old times, but that isn't going to work. Goooo, spear!! Kaboom!!”

“Ohhhh!! Titty squeeze!!”

I went all out in a man's fight to the death, but I didn't alter the weapon's path by a single millimeter. All I felt was solid metal. Despite the miniskirt, she actually had armor over the chest!!

Meanwhile, the ultra-heavy spear released by the Valkyrie lost its form in midair, transformed into a liquid weapon, and collided with the side of the final armored truck. More than slide to the side, the tires rose from the asphalt and the entire truck flipped over like an overturned tea table. It rolled and rolled and rolled, taking out guardrails and trees along the way, until it was finally slowed by scraping along building walls.

Karen ignored the lanes of the road, spun the motorcycle around, and came to a stop.

“Now, that should finish up Round 1. Of course, I doubt Evil Spirit will just accept defeat.”

“...What?”

“A second and third group will rush here to collect the cargo from the incapacitated trucks. Of course, that just means more targets for me since I want to wipe out every last one of them. Plus, troubleshooters tend to have a lot of information from multiple sections due to their unique job and as insurance for their own survival, so if I capture one of them and get them to talk, I’ll finally have a complete picture of Evil Spirit and a chance to wipe them out.”

...Her job or species or whatever was Valkyrie, right? Not the Great King of Angolmois?

Maybe this was just how goddesses were in Norse Mythology where all the power was held by bearded machos obsessed with war.

“Buuut things are a little different for you since you want to save Class Rep-chan, right? Now, I think you would be a lot safer if you inspected the cargo in the time before the next firefight begins. A stray bullet and a stray explosion will kill you just the same.”

“Goddammit!!”

Karen seemed to be in control of everything, but I couldn’t try to wrest control away from her either. I had to find a way to take back the Class Rep’s soul.



## Part 5

I let go of the Valkyrie wife's hips, climbed down from the large motorcycle's back seat, and approached the armored truck that had come to a stop on its side.

It had double doors on the very back, but they looked strange while it was on its side.

"Maxwell, how do you open the back of a truck? Will this lever do the trick?"

"Warning."

"?"

I pulled the lever down without knowing what Maxwell meant.

Immediately, a thick arm burst out from the open door.

"Wah!!"

I practically tackled the door to reclose it. It felt like slamming shut an oven door. And that must have worked because the mystery person's arm was caught in the door.

It was a black arm covered in tattoos. The glinting light held in the hand was a large knife.

Karen had said even raw eggs would be safe inside the trucks, so did that mean the Evil Spirit bastards wouldn't necessarily be incapacitated even after it rolled!?

Of course, I was just an amateur. If someone with a knife rushed at me, there was no guarantee I could stop them unscathed. At best, I could hit them while they stabbed me.

"Dammit! Goddammit!!"

I was desperate.

I slammed my shoulder against the aluminum door a second and third time and I heard screaming through the crack. But the hand still held the knife. I couldn't release that arm which lashed about like a great serpent caught between rocks. I had to get that blade out of its grasp! So I tackled the door one more time.

And an unpleasant sound much like a dry branch breaking reached me through the thin door. The arm drooped down, the knife finally fell away, and the scream inside grew even louder.

Could it be?

Had I just...?

"Urp!!"

Just as I doubled over and held a hand to my mouth, the double doors burst open. The door hit me and I rolled along the road while a large muscular man exited the armored truck.

"...!?"

I didn't have any kind of weapon. I swung my leg up while lying on the asphalt, but surprisingly, nothing happened.

In fact, the man collapsed onto the road with his eyes nearly rolled back in his head.

...Did he pass out from the pain of the broken arm?

"Pant, pant..."

Sweaty and unable to catch my breath, I got up, slowly circled around the large black man, and then recalled the knife on the ground. I considered picking it up, but ultimately settled on kicking it away.

This was not virtual reality, so I couldn't even think of picking up a deadly weapon. I didn't want to become a corpse, but I didn't want to carelessly create one either.

I peered inside the back of the armored truck.

...It didn't look like anyone else was hiding inside.

It was dark since it had no windows. Several steel racks were bolted to the walls and those were packed full of plastic storage cases. Even with the truck on its side, the cases and racks had not fallen or scattered about. Just like Karen had suggested.

But...

“How am I supposed to find the Class Rep’s soul? Is it in a bottle and is it in some kind of visible or tangible form?”

I pulled a storage case from a steel rack near the door. When I undid the symmetrical pair of latches and removed the lid, something popped out like it was a jack-in-the-box.

“Wah!?”

I fell on my ass because I thought it was a weird trap, but nothing blew up.

What came out was a thumb-sized...

“What the hell? A small old man? The Issun-boshi, or something???”

“I am a Muryan! And this has not been a fun time for me.”

A Muryan. ...With the foreign-sounding name and his small size, was that a European fairy or something? It was so minor that I had no knowledge of it.

I held my smartphone sideways to give Maxwell a view and I soon had the answer.

“It appears to be an old fairy with Celtic roots,” said Maxwell. “They were originally powerful druids, but they were forced to wander the earth as fairies because they could not enter the heaven of the religion symbolized by the cross.”

“Wait, wait, wait. That’s too much info. First of all, what are druids?”

“Sure. Those were the male priests in charge of Celtic rituals, but the modern image may be closer to the old wizards seen in picture books.”

...That sounded a little different from Vampires and Zombies, but then again, my underclassman Itou Helen was a Witch yet still counted as an Archenemy.

“Muryans have only a limited amount of paranormal power and their bodies

shrink bit by bit each time they use it,” explained Maxwell. “In modern times, they are generally the size of an ant or smaller, so this one is quite large.”

“Use their power, hm?”

I knew this was an age where Vampires, Zombies, and even legit Demon Lords like Lilith and Leviathan were wandering around, but I wasn’t sure what exactly that meant. Karen was a mystery in the same way. Although that may have been from the preconception that a god was a perfect being.

The finger-puppet old man flailed his tiny hands around.

“I am quite large, so I can still use a lot of my mystical power! If you’re in trouble, tell me what you need!”

“Quite the mystical power you’ve got if you were still captured by a human black market.”

“They were targeting my mystical power, so there’s no helping that. It’s valuable!”

He was an argumentative little guy. But the refusal to admit a mistake did seem in character for a priest who brought the people together by controlling the side of good.

“Besides, why would you support me?” I asked. “Just because you refuse to do what Evil Spirit wants doesn’t mean you’re going to help just anyone, does it?”

“Don’t be silly. You just saved me, did you not? A servant of the mystical has no interest in this world’s ideas of good and evil, but we will repay our debts!”

“...Then you’re trying to repay the wrong person. I wasn’t the one who saved you.”

Not that I wanted to give any more mystical power to that Valkyrie who was like a berserker or even a god of destruction.

But that was an interesting point.

I had no idea if Karen had done it on purpose, but her violence resulted in more than just destruction. There were lives and futures she saved like this.

I still didn't agree with her methods, but maybe she wasn't lying about being a god.

"Hey, I want to repay you! Ohh, I feel like I was holding my mystical power in reserve for just this moment. I'm ready to work extra hard. Ask anything of me!!"

"Oh, shut up. Then tell me where the Class Rep's-..."

"Warning," interrupted Maxwell. "A Muryan's size shrinks every time he uses his power. Please be aware that asking anything of him is hastening his demise."

"...Never mind! Just hurry up and run away!"

And was he not the only one that was captured? I began pulling storage cases from the steel racks and opening their lids.

It was a complete mess.

Winged fairies straight out of a picture book, balls of hair, and other tiny creatures flew out. Were they all Archenemies who had been sold to the black market as the person someone most cared about?

"Hurry out of here, you idiots! Don't get caught by us humans again!!"

Even after yelling at them, only a minority flew from the truck. More of them continued flying around above my head.

"Are they making fun of me after I saved them...?"

"No," said Maxwell. "They likely do not want to leave you here."

...

Also, the storage cases contained more than just palm-sized Archenemies.

"What are these?"

Some of the cases were stuffed full of something like soft white bread dough before it was baked in the oven. Each one was about the size of a slice of bread, but a closer look showed super-deformed figures with small arms, legs, and a head attached to a round torso.

...Were they something like large gingerbread men?

“Those are Voodoo dolls,” said the Muryan while looking at the pieces of bread dough larger than he was. “Those are the source of Evil Spirit’s fearsome secret techniques! Shiver, shiver.”

“So they’re like Voodoo good-luck charms or something?”

That felt like a safe assumption since it had Voodoo in the name.

But Maxwell made an odd interruption.

“No. Just like the rotting Zombies that continually spread their infection, Voodoo dolls are no more than a product of Western ignorance. Real Voodoo has no rituals using wheat dolls.”

“Eh?”

“It can be confusing because the demand from Western tourists means you can find them in Haitian souvenir shops, but that kind of fictional souvenir can be found in Japan as well. Like some kind of meat or some kind of mummy.”

“So it’s like the marimo bottles found at regional souvenir shops? Y’know, where they couldn’t possibly be selling real ones since they’re a protected species.”

This black market was known for allowing you to acquire anything you might want, so the world was truly a harsh place if they had fake goods there. I thought about that while poking at the stomach of a wheat doll the size of a slice of bread.

Wait, did that comical doll’s face just twist in displeasure?

“W-wah!?”

I threw aside the Voodoo doll(?) and shouted.

What was that?

It was made of half-dried wheat, so had gravity caused the surface of the face to sag???

The Muryan waved both hands up at me.

“See, what’d I tell you? The Voodoo dolls are a fearsome ceremonial tool. I can sense the waves of their souls!”

“Souls?”

“That’s right. I dunno what they’re used for, but there are exposed souls contained in those things. They’re probably containers to keep the souls from deteriorating.”

I felt like an unpleasant sensation had gotten into my fingertip. Like the soft squishy feeling would not go away.

“Maxwell!”

“No. Your smartphone is not equipped with a sensor to detect the presence of a soul. This cannot be proven one way or the other.”

“Isn’t there anything we could connect to the Class Rep!?”

I quickly picked up the wheat doll I had dropped on the floor and then looked to the original storage case.

Were all of them the same?

If so, there had to be about 100 in that one box alone!

“What are Voodoo dolls exactly? Do you put a hair or fingernail in them like with a straw doll? If so, we could use that to identify the person!”

“Again, your smartphone is not equipped to analyze the human genome. Also, Voodoo dolls are not real. The legends you hear are entirely separate from real Haitian Voodoo, so even if Voodoo is real, it would not help us examine these wheat dolls.”

“But there’s definitely something inside these. Uuh, why is it so squishy!?”

It seemed to be vibrating on the inside. Or was it moving on its own!?

“It probably does not matter whether or not it is proper Voodoo,” said Maxwell. “Voodoo never had a fixed number of gods, so it emphasized the mixture and absorption of other religions as one of their own gods.”

“That doesn’t matter! I just want to know what this is! Is there a soul inside!? And if so, which one is the Class Rep’s!?”

“No. Even if they are capable of sealing a soul inside, is there any way to tell them apart with outside observation?”

Damn, this was like looking at unlabeled blood transfusion packs. No matter how many you had, there was too little information to act. Even though there was a life you could save with the right one!

And just then...

“...?”

I noticed something odd when I looked over at the storage case packed full of wheat dolls the size of bread slices.

Yes. That was right.

...Their heights weren't all the same? Some of the heads seemed to stick up above the rest.

When I viewed the one I was poking in my hand, it looked like an inhuman super-deformed figure. But when I pulled another one from the storage case and compared them, I could finally see some differences.

“They aren't mass-produced from a mold?”

Yes, it looked like they had distinct body types and sexes. The faces were highly simplified, but they were distinct.

“Maxwell, can you run facial recognition on them?”

“No. They are too deformed to compare with photos found on social media or elsewhere.”

Then was there any other way to identify them? Fingerprints, veins, voiceprints, retinas, blood, the auditory signal from sound waves bounce off the inner ear.

And...yes.

The wheat doll trembling in my hand was moving.

“Then analyze the walking pattern! That's used to identify people when you can't see their face in the video footage, right? These things can move around and you can't mask your center of gravity or gait even when inside a full-body costume!”

Unlike social media photos, it might sound like walking videos would be too



limited a sample pool, but more than 20 million videos were uploaded every day. Sift through every pixel of those and you could even find a ninja.

“Search complete. I have detected individuals on video sites whose walking patterns match the dolls’. Comparing the faces to social media. I have created a list of the 103 revealed identities.”

Seriously? That small case had a full school year’s worth of students?

But this was no time to gasp in surprise.

“We don’t have time to pursue all of them. What about the Class Rep!?”

“She created an account for social purposes, but she is not the type to actively post about her day. I also cannot find a walking video for her.”

“Search the videos of athletic and cultural festivals on our school’s official account! She’s not a legendary ninja, so she has to show up somewhere in this day and age. She must at least be in the corner of the screen somewhere!”

“No. I have found a walking sample of her in gym clothes, but it does not match any of the walking patterns of the dolls in the case.”

“Dammit!”

This was the wrong one, but these were people’s lives and I couldn’t treat them lightly. I returned the squishy doll to its case and began pulling out more cases.

“Where are you!? Where are you, Class Rep!?”

“I cannot detect her.”

“Is she in one of the other trucks!?”

I couldn’t just abandon the wheat dolls here either...but what was I supposed to do? Calling the police or an ambulance didn’t seem right. Since they were souls, should I call a shrine maiden or priest? No, that didn’t seem right either. This was the occult, but it was a little different, so maybe head the opposite way and go with a demon? Yes, a demon!

“Maxwell, email my stepmom for advice! Demon Lord Lilith must know how to deal with people’s souls. Y’know, like with those contracts on parchment.”

“Sure. But making those assumptions about Archenemies might upset her and telling her you have skipped school and gotten involved with an Archenemy incident probably will not end well for you. But a command is a command, so I will comply.”

“Ehh!? Wait, wait! Then let’s think about this and state it in a more indirect way, so...ahh, it already says ‘message sent’!! Ahhh!!”

“Instead of responding to the email, she has immediately called you, so what should I do?”

“Send her to voicemail forever!!”

Who else would know about souls? Oh, no. I couldn’t think of anyone. That meant I had to rely on someone who could move them somewhere safe so the black market couldn’t retrieve them.

My biological mom would probably be even angrier, so she was out. My Vampire older sister couldn’t do anything during the day and Ayumi and Itou Helen were at school. I couldn’t call any of them right away.

Hmm, in that case...

“I know. Let’s go with Himatsuri-san, the eccentric rich girl. Unlike her Siren sister, she’s human, but she has to have a lot of money. I’m not sure how she normally lives her life, but she’s gotta have a lot of spare time and space.”

“I attached that terrible assessment along with the message.”

“Max, you idiot!!”

“She sent back a message containing a middle-finger stamp. She says she will be here soon.”

“Then let’s finish this before that cabaret girl with the crazy blonde hair arrives! Hurry, hurry!!”

I left the one truck to the Murryan and other fairies while I ran to the next armored truck.

But as soon as I stepped out from the back of the truck, a powerful tremor and explosion rang out. A black bulletproof car was blown away by a pressurized torrent created from a golden spear. This was of course courtesy of

Valkyrie Karen. The car probably belonged to Evil Spirit reinforcements, but she was merciless! The bulletproof car was parked sideways like a barricade, but a hole was punched through its side, the heavy car rolled over, and it crushed the thugs using it as a shield. It didn't even matter that they were armed with automatic handguns and shotguns. The fearsome gold rush turned more and more bulletproof cars into scrap metal before they could even aim their guns.

"Dammit, Karen isn't even trying to hide her identity!"

"You speculated she could escape to heaven to avoid retaliation, but it appears she is simply too powerful to care."

Another loud explosion rang out and a piece of metal larger than a cutting board spun right past my cheek. Even just watching was putting my life at risk, so I couldn't pretend like this was none of my concern. Whether it would actually help or not, I crouched low as I left.

The next armored truck was about 400 meters away. Due to Karen's rampage drawing all the attention, there were no armed thugs here.

I circled behind the truck and pressed against the aluminum door.

"I'm opening it."

"Sure."

Unlike before, there was not an assassin lying in wait within. I only found the steel racks and storage cases.

"Let's find the Class Rep. Check for her walking pattern."

I pulled out all the cases and opened them. There were animals like a long-bodied weasel, but also boxes stuffed full of wheat dolls.

However...

"No. I do not detect any matching walking patterns. These souls all belong to other people."

"After all this!? Are you sure the sample you're using is right? What videos did you use?"

"If you are unsatisfied with my accuracy, then compare them yourself. Hmph."

(・Д・) Ehhh?”

“...I see your ability to complain is evolving.”

The program’s learning speed was frightening, but I had to focus elsewhere. Karen had originally destroyed three armored trucks plus some bodyguard trucks. I had checked two of those, so the final truck sounded the most suspicious. Not only for finding the Class Rep, but also for being taken out by an Evil Spirit attack.

To put it another way, what I wanted had to be in that third truck.

I motivated myself to clear away the hopeless sense of wasted effort, but then I felt something tugging at the bottom of my pants.

I had nearly stepped on...something the size of a kitten. It was a fleshy mass with lots of eyeballs. To be blunt, it wasn’t very cute.

“I am Taisui. May I come out now?”

“Hurry on out. And don’t let any bad humans catch you again.”

“...(Sparkle sparkle sparkle sparkle.)”

“No, I’m not aiming for a reward like in an old story! I really want you to just get out of here!!”

There seemed to be some other Archenemies captured in the same truck, so I had the larger ones carry away the cases of wheat dolls before I started running to the final truck.

“Anyway, what do you think?”

“That question is far too far too fuzzy. Are you testing me?” asked Maxwell.

“No, I’m not. Evil Spirit is a giant black market with Voodoo origins, right? And yet we haven’t seen very much in the form of curses and the occult.”

“There were Voodoo dolls in those cases. Are we getting forgetful, grandpa?  
(´・ω・)`”

“Now you’re making fun of me? Are you holding some kind of grudge? Or is this a dangerous AI rebellious phase? Regardless, there weren’t any occult weapons. Even though we’ve reached an age where schoolgirls are using curses

to acquire souls to sacrifice.”

“Due to the Zombie association, you might be thinking of a primitive religion from a former age, but Voodoo actually controlled an entire nation during the Cold War era. Just search for ‘François Duvalier’, ‘president’, and ‘occult reign of terror’.”

“I’d rather not look that up because I know I’d regret it, but are you saying they aren’t just relying on the occult?”

“I am only using a human rights organization’s website as a source, but the Voodoo regime apparently established a reign of terror using both curses and the direct violence of armed soldiers. They seem to have used an organization known as Tonton Macoute to punish and control their own people, but that is also the name of a Voodoo monster.”

“...So everything they needed for their goals was treated like a Voodoo miracle, hm?”

“It was originally the ultimate syncretic religion that took in the gods of any other religion.”

Was it biased to find it weird when no Zombies or occult elements showed up when dealing with Voodoo? Back at Voodoo’s homeland, using bulletproof cars and machineguns counted as Voodoo. That regime was apparently from the Cold War era, but these days, some might say that manipulating public opinion with social media bots and GPS smart bombs were Voodoo.

...That meant I had no way of predicting what was inside this jack-in-the-box.

The truck’s cab was squashed after crashing into the thick reinforced concrete support for the elevated highway. The doors were still closed, so I ignored the cab. I made my way around to the closed aluminum space in the back.

I didn’t even have to open it.

A dark red liquid was dripping from the slight space below the closed double doors.

“Warning.”

“...Is this part of Voodoo’s mysticism too? Are you cursed when you touch

contaminated blood or something?”

“I was only trying to tell you to consider the risk of infectious disease. (ノД`)  
Geez.”

“You’re not allowed to use emoticons anymore.”

I decided to try not to touch it. I hesitantly approached the door and grabbed the large lever.

And then I noticed something.

“The lock...?”

It was unlocked. My tension grew. My throat was unnaturally dry and my pulse was racing. With this and the fresh blood dripping from below the door, I didn’t want to know what I would find inside.

I gathered just a bit of strength, but the unpleasant creaking was too loud for comfort. After opening it just a few centimeters – or millimeters? – I could sense the intensely sticky air pushing out at me from the gap. This truck was clearly different from the others. Something was happening here. But what exactly was it? Since I had yet to find the wheat doll containing the Class Rep’s soul, it had to be in here.

“Maxwell...”

I held my smartphone on its side and used my other hand to slowly – truly slowly – pull the aluminum door toward me.

If something popped out at me like before, I was planning to hit them with a bright flashing light.

But there was no need for that.

“Uuh...!?”

There was an incredible stench that felt like a solid wall. It was a rusty smell that brought to mind a dangerous shade of red. The inside of this truck would have been the same as the others, but a few of the steel racks had fallen and the storage cases were scattered around. Some of the lids had opened, but there were no small Archenemies flying around.

...I was afraid to share the same space as whatever was in here.

I didn't want to go inside.

But I had to.

If the storage cases had dumped their contents, what had happened to the Class Rep? She had to be in this final truck.

I shined my smartphone's backlight inside the windowless area and followed the dripping blood back to its source.

"..."

It was one of those three damn girls. ...Which one was this again?

Regardless, it was one of them.

Oh, so after completing the rite of passage, she really had become a member of that vague secret organization known as Evil Spirit. I had nothing but scorn for her.

At any rate, a girl about my age lay face down on the floor. One of the steel racks had fallen on her. Since I was barehanded, I was hesitant to touch anything and leave fingerprints here.

...But it was just one of the three?

What had happened to the other two? I had checked all of the original three trucks, but it hadn't looked like they had each ridden on a different one. Or had they slipped in with the bodyguard vehicles? I doubted the Voodoo Evil Spirit would prioritize those three differently.

No.

Or...?

"...Gh."

My shoulders tensed when I heard a quiet groan. Who had it been? The girl I could see pinned there, or someone else? I should have been happy to learn there were more survivors, but I couldn't stop the heavy pressure weighing on my stomach.

I had to look at this rationally.

How many people were here and how dangerous were they?

“The girl pinned below the steel rack is Hishigami Ai,” said Maxwell. “She appears to still be breathing.”

Oh, so this was Hishigami Ai. I see, I see.

“But I don’t think that groan came from her,” I said. “It came from further back...”

I climbed up into the enclosed space while doing my best not to touch any of the blood. I couldn’t let my guard down even when the girl was pinned down. I had already seen plenty of projectile weapons such as guns.

...Not that there was anything I could do if she did pull a gun.

I felt like I was searching the jungle at night with only a handmade spear to defend myself against crocodiles, but I made my way past the fallen steel racks and scattered storage cases. I lightly kicked Hishigami Ai’s head where she lay pinned face down and continued on after confirming she was unconscious.

Was I being unpleasantly rational, or had the extreme tension fried the wiring in my brain? Hadn’t I just casually kicked a girl in the head?

I peered around a diagonally-tilted steel rack to look further back and I saw something like a large doll leaning against the aluminum wall.

No, it was a high school girl sitting on the floor with limbs sprawled out and head tilted.

Hishigami Ai was pinned below the shelves, so that left Andou Star and Sagawa Akemi. This was, um...

“Based on the student handbook master data on the faculty server, that is Andou Star.”

I see.

Not that it really mattered.

“Who...are you...? Someone from school...?”

I was hesitant to answer. It was obvious from my uniform, but I tried my best to deny it.



“Do you really think I would venture into somewhere so dangerous while wearing my own school uniform?”

“Ha...ha. It’s not like you would’ve had time to think through it like that...”

...My cheap trick hadn’t worked.

“Akemi ran off. Dammit, I said we should help Ai there, but she ditched us both like we’re burdens holding her back...”

“To be honest, I don’t really care. Your sob story isn’t going to affect me. I don’t give a shit if you joined the black market to save your sick mother or if it was necessary to save the 7 billion people on this planet! I have business with the sacrifice you offered to Evil Spirit!!”

“...Oh, so it’s about that.”

She took a shallow breath and laughed with blood dripping from her forehead and blinding one of her eyes. I could only guess the third friend had hit her with some kind of blunt weapon.

“That’s like the contract connecting a member to the organization. When Akemi ran off looking for help, she took it with her...”

“God...”

Goddammit!!!!!!

“Where did she go with the Class Rep’s wheat doll!?”

“How should I know? But if you find her, could you get back at her for Ai and me as well? She’s not the type to care if a guy tries to force himself on her, so really you just need to stab her a few times...”

Their values made no sense to me. I had trouble believing we attended the same school. Unlike an obvious cut, I wasn’t sure what to do with a head injury, so there was nothing for me to do. And with Karen and Evil Spirit having their firefight out there, there was no point in calling an ambulance. The professionals would arrive without my assistance. Although the obvious crimes going on would mean all the information would be shared with the police.

They would be rescued and then arrested.

I left the armored truck, held up my smartphone, and slowly spun around. I tried to film everything around me.

“Maxwell, can you figure anything out?”

“There is a path of footprints likely left by someone who stepped in a pool of blood. Although it is so blatant that it could be a trap.”

“...”

When I viewed the scene through the screen, color flashed over the bloody footprints. And following them led to...what was that? There was a metal door at the bottom of the thick reinforced concrete support for the elevated highway.

Was it the entrance to a storeroom that led underground?

Hm? A door leading underground in this city???

“It may be part of the tunnel network created as the former Bright Cross’s abduction infrastructure,” said Maxwell.

“If so, she could have escaped to anywhere in the city, dammit!”

Valkyrie Karen was...focused on her legendary scale firefight with the humans. I doubted she would come if I called for her and allowing that god of destruction to approach would only put the Class Rep’s soul in danger.

It was risky, but I was going to have to do it myself.

I frantically ran toward the metal door.

I didn’t care about Sagawa Akemi. She was free to escape to the other side of Mars and laugh triumphantly if she wanted, but I couldn’t let her bring the Class Rep with her!! Why couldn’t she screw up her life without dragging other people into it!? That was the only thing on my mind as I kept low and ran through the battlefield below the elevated highway.

The metal door was not locked.

I flung it open and found narrow concrete stairs leading down. ...There was more below. Most likely, I would find a thick round door like the ones used to protect bank vaults.

I was not given time to gulp and gather my resolve.

Without warning, someone grabbed my shoulder from behind and forcefully spun me around. No, it didn't end there. A tremendous shock ran through the bridge of my nose and the color white filled my vision.

A really bad blow apparently didn't send you flying backwards like in manga. My knees went limp and I fell straight down.

What...?

Who...?

"Give it a rest already, Onii-chan! Fuguuu!!"

This was a total surprise.

Before my vision recovered, a familiar girl's voice filled my head with an excess of information.

"Eh? A-Ayumi!? Wh-why!?"

"The online news is having a field day with the zoo explosion and the car chase! And just when I'm thinking 'surely not', I get an email from mom! And – tah dah! – that pretty much confirmed it!! Onii-chan, you might have accepted the risks, but did you ever stop to think what it would feel like for us to suddenly find ourselves the family of the suspect in a serious incident!?"

The ridiculous Hollywood-level stuff like the explosion and the car chase been done by Valkyrie Karen, but she could escape to heaven at any time. If I couldn't objectively prove I was innocent, I would be in the most trouble here.

"Still, is that any reason to punch me in the face before even saying hello? Girls should go for a slap instead."

"I have about 10-times the muscular strength of a human, so a serious slap from me would have spun your head around 360 degrees."

"And what about school!? You go to a prestigious girl's school, don't you!?"

"Fuguu! I don't want to hear that from you, Onii-chan!"

My vision finally returned while I sat pathetically on the ground. I touched my face and found my nose was not bleeding or broken. ...Although that made me

worried about my little sister who was familiar enough with violence to know exactly how much to hold back.

The short girl with black butter roll twintails put her hands on her hips while wearing her school uniform which looked like the best of both worlds between a sailor uniform and a double blazer.

“So how far have you gotten on rescuing the Class Rep? Let’s get this over with and get things back on track.”

“You’ll help me...?”

“Contacting mom for help was definitely a mistake, Onii-chan. We need to settle this before she shows up and causes a small catastrophe.”

“Ehh!? What is going on back at home!?”

“I’d rather not think about it. So do we need to use that underground route? If you know the way, then let’s get going!!”

## **[crucial notice] A Trading Company's Warning Concerning Bokors [on the pinup board]**

A Bokor is someone who has mastered Voodoo but uses its secret techniques for evil purposes.

(When negotiating, show respect by avoiding negative terms such as “evil” and “wicked”).

They are said to be a fallen version of the proper priests known as Houngan, or the frightening other face of the Houngan when they exact punishment.

The creation of Zombies is classified as the work of Bokors borrowing the power of the fearsome Petro gods.

(Note: The modern Zombie Archenemies are not purely their creations. The Zombies we know are created by a mutated pathogen known as Acute Zombie Powder, which was created when the chemicals used in their priestly duties destroyed the bonds of a local virus. Make sure you do not confuse the two concepts.)

Whatever their goals, a Bokor has mastered their art as much as a Houngan. They pass through the level of Hounsi and Kanzo before being accepted as a priest, at which point flames cannot take their lives, they receive the power of many gods known as Mystères, and they acquire the charisma needed to rule an entire nation.

They are known for the skilled chemical techniques seen in the creation of Zombies and the lime poison as well as for the soul management techniques seen in Voodoo dolls and living sacrifices. Despite what Western entertainment would have you think, they are very skilled at handling the living body.

Also, Voodoo thinks of the human body (both physically and spiritually) as made up of five components. And of course, the priests manipulate those five

components to work in their own favor and against others.

# Chapter 3

## Part 1

There was something there.

There had to be something bad up ahead.

I was ready for that much. It was more of a mental defensive line than having an actual plan, but I was still nervously cautious.

It only took one step.

After just one step upon descending the stairs, I realized I had made a mistake.

There was no obvious light or sound. I did not find a ghost with a transparent lower half or a bloody fallen warrior.

It happened as soon as the sole of my shoe touched the concrete floor.

“Ugh!?”

It felt like I had stepped in some kind of super sticky pollution. I quickly aimed my smartphone’s backlight at my feet...but there was nothing there. Even though my toes felt a disgusting sensation like my foot had plunged ankle-deep in a full spittoon. When I raised my feet, it seemed odd that no sticky strings were attached to it.

Had Sagawa Akemi really run down here to put her mind at ease?

Had Evil Spirit spread *this* in order to kindly embrace their members?

Really and truly?

All I felt was a hunch that I was mistaken about something.

“Ayu...mi? Do you know what...this is????”

“I’m one of the products, so I don’t know how everything is created. I don’t know what’s written in the Bokor textbooks. But if they’re simply using drug components to distort our perception, there shouldn’t be any way to have it affect everyone the same. Maybe they’ve sprinkled flour around and provided some kind of substitute for flesh or mucous membranes.”

...My dumb little sister said some things I didn’t understand, but that wasn’t what mattered. Ayumi had noticed this oddity too.

“...”

In Kukyou City, every home supposedly had an underground space to be used as a disaster shelter. Those sealed doors had actually connected to the large-scale tunnel network created by the Bright Cross to secretly abduct Archenemies, but the large round entrance here had been pried open.

...But how?

The central handle was a bent mess and a few of the deadbolts had snapped. But those things were designed to resist disasters, so they should have been able to survive an attack from a tyrannosaurus.

I could have sworn something was bursting out from the crack of the slightly opened door.

The more I narrowed my eyes to determine what it was, the more its outlines wavered and its colors danced.

It ultimately looked like long, wet hair.

“Onii-chan, pull yourself together. You’re going to save the Class Rep, right?”

When Ayumi said that, the shimmering thing withdrew a bit. I could still see it in my peripheral vision, but I doubted it was real. It may have been a mixture of lies and the truth. I didn’t know if it was chunks of flesh or flour, but whatever was crawling around at my feet was insignificant. If something truly powerful was lurking in here, I would have already been killed.

I tilted my smartphone sideways and viewed the scene through it.



“Maxwell, search the image for any objects that might trigger a simulacrum phenomenon. Similarly, check for anything – stains on the walls, the backs of bugs, *etc.* – that would look like a face, hand, or humanoid shape and highlight them with a solid color.”

“Sure. Executing masking process.”

...Even if what you thought was a ghost was actually dried pampas grass, the ability to trigger that kind of malfunction in perception with a 100% success rate was still a threat. I couldn't waste time on illusions created by my own brain when anyone could be lying in wait inside these dangerous tunnels.

“The body is divided into 5 parts,” muttered Ayumi. “I think this is interfering with the Ti Bon Ange, which is related to memory and personality. Although I couldn't say whether it's meant to shake pursuit or strengthen the mental state of the Voodoo practitioner.”

“...”

“The things crawling along the walls and at our feet might just be lumps of flour injected with a Gros Bon Ange...no, just with a Nanm to allow it to move in a muscular way. Although I couldn't say whether they're spreading the impurity or eating it to clean it up.”

I breathed in and out.

The stickiness at my feet had mostly gone away. The slipper-sized lumps of flour fled from my gaze like wharf roaches on a rocky beach.

Had this place always been like this?

It was not like I knew the place all that well. And given what had happened in this dark subterranean space, it was best to stay away.

Overall, it felt something like a subway tunnel. It had a domed ceiling and fluorescent lights on the walls at even intervals. The pillars had numbers and letters painted on them and there were tracks on the floor.

It had definitely been a scary place.

But like visiting a haunted house a second time or replaying an RPG, I thought I would have an advantage by knowing the lay of the land. I thought the

location would help us.

Yet it felt this different?

It felt like I had never been here before. No, it was like I had started playing on an ultra-hard sudden death mode no one had told me about.

“There are bloodstains on the ground,” said Maxwell. “They continue further in. I have finished marking the scene through the screen.”

“This isn’t the bloody footprints from before.”

“Sure. You have no tool for analyzing blood samples, but this could have come from elsewhere. The runner may have noticed the footprints here and wiped off her shoes with a cloth that then started dripping, or she may have been injured herself.”

...Were we catching up to her? Or were we being lured in?

I felt like I just kept staring in the mirror and asking myself the same questions over and over again. The words started falling apart in my head.

“Let’s get going, Onii-chan. Whether it’s a Ti Bon Ange or a Nanm, things must not be going according to plan if they’ve pulled out their secret weapon. Not much further now.”

“R-right.”

I awkwardly agreed. At some point, Ayumi and Maxwell had taken the lead. This place had a way of throwing me off no matter what I was trying to do.

I gulped and followed the spots of blood on the floor through the abandoned subterranean space. I had trouble imaging how serious this injury had to be based on the amount of blood. It didn’t seem to be a shallow injury, though.

I relied on the backlight to continue through the curving tunnel.

Ayumi was not holding a light as she walked alongside me. There was a lot I didn’t know about Zombie physiology, but she may have had good night vision.

A few other tunnels joined with this one, but we did not hesitate. The bloodstains on the concrete could not have been more obvious a trail.

I heard an odd sound from the darkness down one of those alternate tunnels.

It sounded a lot like a draft blowing through a hole.

...No, wait.

The wind? In this vast but enclosed underground space???

“This is bad. One of the exits is open! Sagawa Akemi is going to escape!!”

“Wait, Onii-chan!”

Ayumi frantically called out to me, presumably because her night vision was better.

But it was too late.

Just one step too late.

My foot.

My foot stepped in...something.

Something like the muddy bottom of a swamp?

“.....

I did not move for a while.

I did not even check to see what I had stepped in. But I could tell. This was not a bizarre illusion like before. Nor was it a mysterious pawn made from a lump of flour. This was definitely and unmistakably real. I had crossed a forbidden line. I had literally planted my foot squarely on a taboo.

A rusty smell reached my nose. But not of rust itself. It was simply “rusty”. Just like someone speaking around a taboo word, my mind avoided producing the actual answer.

I wasn’t consciously doing it.

Large beads of unpleasant sweat dripped from my cheek to my chin and a shudder ran through my body. And that action placed it in my vision. The distance was zero and our coordinates overlapped. It was right at my feet.

Could I call it...blood?

It was a bucket’s worth of dark red. But I could not exactly call it a pure liquid. It was more like a ball of jelly...

“Urp? Wahh!?”

It was so disgusting I reflexively pulled my hips back. I lost my balance and fell right back onto my ass.

But it wasn't over.

What was that windy noise? Ayumi had told me to stop because she had seen something in the darkness. What more was there!?

The irregular whistling sound was surprisingly close by. I had been panicking, but this actually brought calm rationality back to a part of my mind. It was like the strange optical illusion where a wheel spinning fast enough would begin to look like it was spinning the other way.

Yes, that was right.

“...Close by? But there aren't any exits around here...”

And despite sounding like wind, not one of our hairs was moving. There were no giant round doors nearby. Then this sound had to be something else. It was not wind.

Meanwhile, my puny human eyes adjusted to the darkness.

I could see the outline of something there.

What was it?

Something slender and tall stood at the center of the intersection between two tunnels.

Someone.

Yes, it not *something*. *Someone*.

“Eek!?”

But the sound was not coming from them.

It came from their feet.

A high school girl was desperately clinging to the skinny figure's feet while coughing up soft squishy lumps...and the strange sound...was coming from...her throat...?

“Y-you...what are you...what are you doing there!?”

I finally held out my smartphone’s backlight.

And the light revealed it all.

A sickly pale young man with thin-framed glasses looked like he had stepped out of a painting due to his black suit and tie.

And at his feet, Sagawa Akemi looked like she had been given a deadly poison.

## Part 2

“Oh...”

No matter how closely I watched her mouth, it was impossible to tell what she was trying to say.

“Ah...eh?”

Sagawa Akemi’s eyes rolled back in her head. Even she must have had some pride as a girl that she had been desperately preserving. But she finally reached her limit and a clump larger than her face exploded from her mouth and she collapsed face-first into the dark red mess she had just spewed.

A member of the black market had not been waiting here to help Sagawa Akemi escape. They had used that as an excuse to silence her and erase any thread leading back to Evil Spirit.

At this point, I recalled an animal documentary I had once seen.

In an experiment to test the strength of a certain snake’s venom, they had dripped some venom into a bucket of pig’s blood. After stirring it, the blood had become too thick to remove the stirring stick.

But that wasn’t what this was. This taboo could never exist in the natural world!

“...Wh-what did you even do...to cause this...?”

“What did I do? I squeezed out some lime juice, that’s all.”

That grim reaper opened his mouth while tapping the ground with a cane that looked like an upside-down J. His hand was wrapped around the metal head which was shaped like a small skull.

It was enough for my heart to leap in my chest. He actually responded to me. That should have been entirely normal, but I had trouble trusting anything

normal here.

What was he?

An Archenemy like Ayumi and Erika? Really!?

“Are you unfamiliar with it? It is the most basic of Voodoo curses. You cut off half a lime growing on the tree, leaving the other half on the branch. Perform a certain ritual with the half you took and the half you left will develop the strongest and most undetectable toxin. There is but one antidote: take the half offered on the altar and give it to the victim.”

“...Maxwell.”

“The exact method is not provided, but an online encyclopedia does have an entry on lime poison. And the general explanation is the same.”

Barring something silly like this guy having written that entry himself, this was the real deal.

He was Evil Spirit.

He was a real Bokor lurking at the depths of that Voodoo black market!

I couldn't read his emotions. He tilted his head with eyes like tree hollows, his black bangs shook, and he seemed focused more on Ayumi than me.

“This is something of a problem. What do you think you two are doing here? You do not seem to be Bokors from Evil Spirit.”

“Give-...!”

“What does that matter? At the very least, we don't look like allies, do we?”

I was more motivated by my overwhelmed mind than righteous fury as I just about shouted for him to give back the Class Rep's soul, but Ayumi coldly got in my way.

...This man was from the black market.

Those people would slap a price tag on anything, so I couldn't let him know the Voodoo doll in his hand held any special value. He would use it as a hostage...

Meanwhile, that grim reaper's horribly sickly eyes scanned Ayumi from top to

bottom and he neurotically tapped the floor with his skull-headed cane.

“...Oh? That is some impressive preservation. Much like robots, Zombies are created for their labor, so it is unusual to find one that preserves the brain like that. But that just deepens the mystery. Why would someone ignorant of Voodoo have such a high-quality product?”

“...Just so you know, Houngan control methods won't work on me.”

“No, I would imagine not. Your brain is a bit too fresh to boss around. I see. So the four aspects of your body have been bound together without cutting away the Ti Bon Ange. That structure gives you autonomy. You really should have been allowed to sleep in the dirt a while longer to destroy your decision making power.”

This was a side of Ayumi I had never seen.

This was bad. Before long, my knowledge would be far too inadequate. Like someone who stopped going to school after screwing up their times tables or like someone whose debts just kept piling up, I would be entirely overwhelmed.

“That said, strength is strength. Boy, use her as you like and send her after me as you like. She is yours, is she not?”

That phrasing ignited something deep in my mind. Everything finally came into focus.

Evil Spirit.

I didn't know the detailed distinctions between Voodoo Houngans and Bokors.

But I knew they would use, absorb, and throw out anything, including humans and religions. They would transform laughing and crying humans into walking corpses to achieve their goals.

I could see now how that had transformed into a black market. And I had never intended to get along with them.

“You...!!”

“Warning,” said Maxwell.



But the fire inside me was extinguished just as I started to step forward.

The man in a suit stroked the metal skull head of his J-shaped cane and then tapped it against the floor.

And words overflowed from his mouth.

“But that means no hard feelings. If you will use a criminal, then you can hardly complain if I use a criminal of my own.”

Something squirmed.

It was at the feet of that gloomy man with sickly eyes hidden behind his glasses. It was the high school girl, Sagawa Akemi, who had remained motionless ever since collapsing face-first into the lump of what looked like dark red jelly. Instead of smoothly standing up, it was more like her head, arms, and legs were slithering around on their own like struggling snakes.

Ayumi’s eyes widened and she shouted.

“Acute Zombie Powder!? Directly below such a big city!?”

“The lime toxin is no more than an ignition meant to activate that. Besides, poisons and medicines are two sides of the same coin. If you can only use deadly poisons to kill, you have a long way to go as a priest who holds all things in their hands.”

The suit-wearing grim reaper did not seem to mind at all.

“And a controlled mutation is much better than the traditional methods when it comes to removing the Ti Bon Ange from the body and tying the three aspects together. And why the surprise? We Bokors who have offered a sacrifice to an evil spirit, so we can acquire all but the person we care for most.”

The unrestrained black-haired priest was a perfect contrast. He was entirely broken, but he did not move an inch. He said he had offered up the person he cared for most. Was this the end result of someone who had failed to find anything more important than themselves?

“The situation is too urgent to bury her and allow her brain to mature. Her movements will be somewhat awkward since the separation of the Ti Bon Ange will be incomplete, so I must apologize in advance.”

## Part 3

This was different from the Western-born image seen in movies and games. This was a Zombie created by a secret Voodoo ritual carried out by a legit Bokor.

Fire extinguisher, fire axe, rail-changing lever...anything. My eyes darted about in search of some kind of weapon so my legs would not give out from fear. When Ayumi and Sagawa Akemi (who was being controlled like a marionette) began grappling with monstrous strength rivalling construction machinery, it would mean a lot if I felt like I could do something.

Or so I thought.

And yet...

Without warning, Sagawa Akemi's uniform swelled out from within and her entire body inflated like a round balloon.

"Wha-...ah...?"

I had Ayumi as an example of a Zombie. I was so familiar with that Archenemy, so when this bizarre form was so very different, my mind had trouble keeping up.

"Onii-chan, hide!!"

A tremendous impact hit me from the side as Ayumi shoved me away like I had been hit by a small motorcycle. And as soon as the two of us made it behind a concrete pillar...

"!?"

"!!"

...How could I even describe it?

It did not come from her mouth. In fact, she seemed to retain some of her

senses to the very end. But because she so desperately clamped her lips shut, it had nowhere to go and a vertical line split open from her throat to just above her navel. Since I was shoved behind the pillar, I didn't see what happened next. But I did hear a wet popping sound. It was likely fully-transformed blood, flesh, fat, and bone. The horrific sound that rang in my ears was like shoving a dissolved human body in a pump and spraying it out of a firehose. The front and sides of the pillar sizzled like Chinese cooking. I did not at all feel like we were safe here. The popping sound that lingered in my ears and the white haze that hung in the air seemed sinister enough.

I could not see directly ahead due to the pillar shielding us. But I heard a monotone voice from the young man who had to be standing next to that cannon which launched the flesh and blood contained in the bag of skin.

“The true purpose and essence of Zombies is to convert criminals into a source of labor that will support the community ruled by the priest. And physical labor performed with monstrous strength is not the only thing demanded of them.”

He wasn't affected?

In the simulator, the Zombies had tried to bite anyone who approached, even Ayumi. Did he have a way of removing himself as a target or at least partially controlling them?

Ayumi whispered some extra information while I practically embraced her.

“It's like a zombie computer. If a ritual would be too risky to do yourself, you build a filter using some poor victim. That way the side effects won't reach you.”

“The Petro are so unruly, you see. Prayers to them can be quite effective, but the curses when you screw it up are quite cruel indeed. It never hurts to keep some insurance.”

The Bokor spoke calmly before I could say anything.

...Could he hear our conversation? Or had he just guessed we would be saying something along those lines?

The more I thought about it, the more it trapped me.

I spoke to Ayumi in my arms.

“More importantly, what happened to the Class Rep’s doll? Did Sagawa have it or did that Bokor take it?”

“It’s always her with you, isn’t it?”

“You have to ask? Should I add that to my blog profile?”

This man was from the black market. He would not let a “product” go to waste, no matter what it was.

I pulled a pocket tissue from the packet, balled it up, and threw it outside the pillar.

...I was afraid of the white haze and the sticky goop, but the tissue didn’t immediately grow discolored, dissolve, or burn. Would we be fine as long as that stuff wasn’t directly dumped over our heads?

Instead, the movement must have caught their attention because I heard a few sticky sounds from beyond the pillar.

“Looks like that guts cannon wasn’t a one-time thing...!”

“With the filter in place, it doesn’t matter to the Bokor how many times the ritual fails. It must be an ecological weapon that can alternately fire and reload as many times as he wants. It repeatedly walks around, intentionally fails the ritual, and breaks down any obstacle with its insides. Nothing could be more of a pain.”

Of course, it was all over if that thing circled around the pillar. I didn’t know what exactly would happen if we took a direct hit from that, but I really didn’t want to think about it much.

“...Onii-chan, start running on my signal.”

“Ayumi.”

“We’re done for if she circles around. There’s another tunnel right over there, right? We need to take action before that isn’t an option any longer. C’mon!”

I gasped.

Her muscular strength was 10 times that of a normal person. Instead of

pushing or pulling me, she essentially threw me out from behind the pillar.

Even so, time seemed to stop in the instant my eyes met those of the fattened lump of flesh.

The line down the center of her body wriggled irregularly.

With a painfully-loud noise, the tunnel was once more filled with the sticky components of a human body.

It was an extremely close call.

One step before the intersection, I rolled onto a different path that branched off like a lowercase “y” and I just barely escaped the wet blast.

I could never even get close in a normal fight. Not to the horrific cannon that Sagawa Akemi had become and not to the Bokor waiting behind her!

Ayumi said more in the gap between attacks.

“There’s no time. Onii-chan, you use Maxwell to find another way around. With emergency waterways for flooding and backup power rooms, there have to be plenty of doors and passageways. That thing seems to only use simple actions. As a fellow Zombie, I’ll attack it head-on and buy some time for you to circle around and hit the Bokor in the back of the head.”

“You can’t, Ayumi. Your body might be sturdy, but you can’t regenerate like Erika can! You can’t just stuff all the goop back in like that one can, right!?”

“I’ll still have a better chance than you. ...And you’re not going to run away until you save the Class Rep, right?”

“...”

“See? I wouldn’t ask you to do something you can’t. I know you won’t run away. So let’s do the best we can do under those conditions.”

I didn’t have time to call her name to stop her. The familiar twin butter rolls of my little sister’s hair vanished back into the tunnel filled with acidic smoke.

The horribly wet sound of the cannon sounded again.

“Dammit!”

There was no stopping it now. If I wanted to minimize Ayumi’s injuries, I had

to end this as quickly as possible.

“Maxwell, search for a route!”

“No. You make that sound simple, but where am I supposed to find a map of the former Bright Cross’s secret facility, you imbecile?”

A-Ayumi, the plan is already falling apart!!

But just like she had said, there was no backing out now. I pretty much blindly ran through the forking tunnels while relying on the echoing sounds to circle around.

Yes, that meant the firing and reloading was continuing.

“This is crazy...”

That Bokor and Zombie had both originally been human, right? Could a single set of “teachings” really change them that much? If so, I was actually shocked at the potential found in humans!!

“I am noise cancelling the echo of the sound and displaying the direction on the screen,” said Maxwell. “I cannot guarantee that it is 100% accurate, but please use it as an estimate.”

“This way?”

Even though I was relying on the sound, I was guided to a rusted metal door in a concrete wall. Was Maxwell using the sound as it passed through the objects? I slowly opened the door and aimed the backlight inside to find a few rusted lockers lined up and fallen over. It may have been a room for inspection and maintenance workers.

No machinery or equipment related to the Bright Cross remained, but there were a few tools lying around. I borrowed a large wrench.

There were a few more doors, but Maxwell guided me to a square panel on the floor. Did it lead to one of the waterways Ayumi had mentioned? I just hoped that goop was not flowing through there.

But.

A thought occurred to me while I climbed underground (while already

underground).

Even if I conveniently avoided Sagawa Akemi and arrived behind the Bokor, what did I do then? Could I silence him with this blunt weapon? In a single blow without him noticing me? This was no time to be thinking about holding back. So did I have to do it with the intention of killing him???

A-A-Ayumi, you idiot. You started this without thinking it through, didn't you? Wasn't it all falling apart around us?

Meanwhile, I crouched down to travel through a 1m-thick steel pipe.

The wet sound of the cannon grew louder. I was close. I would return to that unrealistic battlefield before long. I had likely succeeded in circling around. Once I climbed back up, I would have passed the gas-bloated puppet that Sagawa Akemi had become and I would find the Bokor waiting with back defenselessly exposed.

The sounds alone made me feel faint. I wanted to end it as soon as possible. I adjusted my grip on the heavy wrench in one hand and held my smartphone in the other hand as I approached.

I followed Maxwell's guidance to another square panel I could lift like a manhole cover.

The sound grew a lot louder. It was so close by. I was in the blind spot just beyond a curve in the tunnel.

"Maxwell, he'll notice once I get closer, so shut off the backlight."

"It will be nearly pitch black, so you will have to go the rest of the way blind."

"Smartphone cameras these days are more sensitive than the naked eye, right? You don't need to display it on the screen, but I'll leave it to you. Once I'm within range, turn on the backlight. I'll use that as my cue to rush in, so keep my reach in mind."

"And if the Bokor notices you first?"

"Then flash the light as brightly as possible."

Not much further.

...One more step.

It couldn't be much further than that...

And the judgment was made.

With a lightning-like flash of light, everything in that curving tunnel was burned into my retinas.

.....

My breathing stopped.

The backlight cleared my vision. Maxwell sent several warning messages, but I didn't have time to read them.

I was wrong. I hadn't understood anything.

I had only heard the sound until now. I hadn't actually seen the source itself. I shouldn't have assumed I understood because I existed in the same area. I should have braced myself for a greater shock. I should have been better prepared before attempting this.

Red and black.

The colors were everywhere.

It was like a Rorschach test made by dumping more and more paint on the walls and floor. There was some white and some soft lumps of pink mixed in, but where had those originally been in her body?

...That much I had expected to find, but it went beyond that.

There were twisted triangles contained in circles.

There were astrological symbols.

There were strings of crushed letters.

This would not happen by coincidence. This was not a kind of psychological test that made me see meaning and symbols that were not there. ...It had been designed this way. Had that Voodoo villain had Sagawa Akemi expel her innards over and over and over and over in order to create *this*!?

Yes, Sagawa Akemi's firing and reloading had used the side effects of failing a



ritual. She had been an unfortunate breakwater. That meant the Bokor who held the controller had to be performing some kind of “ritual” to pray to those Petro or whatever they were.

It was a magic circle.

As soon as it entered my vision, it felt like taking a stun gun to the back of the head.

“Gah!?”

“Oh, dear.”

The man in a suit turned around when he saw the light and heard my careless shout, but there was nothing I could do. My spine failed to support me and I crumpled to the ground.

I saw a flashing in front of my eyes.

Just seeing it was enough to do this? This went far beyond red and blue flashing lights!

“I see. So that was your trick. Indeed, human wisdom is more frightening than a monster’s strength.”

Where was the wrench? Where had my smartphone gone? I couldn’t even gather enough strength to get up. If I didn’t focus my mind, I would pass out.

“That visual imprinting was meant for use against an Archenemy. It directly interferes with the Gros Bon Ange. I do apologize for the complete and utter overkill, but this is a battle. I must ask that we hold no hard feelings over the outcome.”

“...Dammit.”

I couldn’t move my arms. Same for my legs. My cheek hurt as the thick metal rail dug into it, but I couldn’t even roll over. I doubted I could even open my mouth properly.

But that was a serious problem.

I had to retrieve the wheat doll containing the Class Rep’s soul. I didn’t know what had happened to Ayumi, but I couldn’t allow her to be harmed any more.

And most importantly, I couldn't let that goddamn Evil Spirit black market continue running.

"Maxwell...where are you? Answer me...I have instructions...run a system...recovery."

"Hm? Is that your god? How very strange. Then what is your connection to that puppet you used as a shield? It does not seem you have removed her Ti Bon Ange to control her."

While the wet cannon sounds continued on and on, my sideways vision flashed irregularly and narrowed. No, I couldn't allow myself to pass out. I knew that, but my convulsing fingers could not detect the familiar sensation of the smartphone. I was just a high school boy without Maxwell. And yet I had to stand up to the legit occult...

"I would like to confirm one last thing. Boy, where do you stand?"

"...?"

"The woman causing trouble up top is a Valkyrie, so she must be an assassin of the kind gods. But what about you? Are you the guide she needed to find us, are you the alarm that called them here with your scream, or are you a witness who observes the mystical and spreads word of the paranormal? To be honest, I see no reason for you to be on this stage."

"...What are you...talking about?"

This Voodoo Bokor was a human, but he wielded greater paranormal power than an Archenemy. I couldn't imagine what the world looked like through his eyes, but my mind was still full of questions.

Yes...

"Where I stand? This stage? What does that mean? Did you know that blue Valkyrie was going to attack!?"

"No? That warrior maiden was a complete surprise. But Evil Spirit is a black market that allows you to freely buy anything you want as long as you sacrifice that which you care for most. We will make her pay. There are countless ways to sell a goddess or two."

...Are you kidding? He only saw that monster as a product?

“Many have doubted the physical existence of the gods, but, well, she did appear on the national broadcast for that Colosseum. This is an excellent opportunity. There were some who said they would love to make her their own.”

This was not some long-held dream or a wish someone had risked their life on.

I had no intention of taking Karen’s side, but still...!

“Thinking back...there was a sign, or rather a messenger. The Echidna provided a warning of the goddess’s visit.”

“Echi-...?”

That Archenemy had infiltrated Absolute Noah and destroyed the entire ark. She had gone missing, so why was her name being mentioned here?

“So that makes your presence all the more baffling. What is your role? Even if this allows us to acquire the Valkyrie, what function do you serve?”

A challenge against the gods.

A group or organization gathered to strike back against those unparalleled beings.

“...You. You’re the same...as the Echidna?”

“It doesn’t really matter. Now, this really is a problem.”

Looking to the black eyes beyond his glasses felt like staring into tree hollows. And he clearly said the following:

“Even if you come as a set with that puppet...there is no way to accurately set your price without knowing your role. It could be troublemaker, sacrificial genius, or whatever else – just something.”

Those words reminded me of the boiling anger in my head. Yes, he was from the black market that discarded lives like a convenience store clerk heated up a bento. And it wasn’t just my life on the chopping block. It was Ayumi’s and...!!

“...Class...Rep...”

“?”

“Where is the Class Rep’s Voodoo doll?”

He actually looked confused. He truly did not know what I meant. To Evil Spirit, each individual life must not have been enough to feel guilt over.

“I do not know who that is, but do you really think we would damage one of our products?”

“Oh, I see...”

That was a relief to hear.

He was the scummiest of scum, but it looked like I could at least trust his professionalism.

And had you forgotten?

It was true I was a regular high school boy who couldn’t do anything without Maxwell. But even without the smartphone in my hand, it could still pick up my voice. I couldn’t see the response on the screen, but I could send instructions.

Plus, it was not concrete I felt pressed against my cheek on the ground.

“Maxwell, you’ve recovered the power, haven’t you? Then send in the train like I commanded you!!”

By the time the noise reached our ears, it was too late. You would not respond in time if you reacted only once the wall of air was pushed out from the darkness.

“Kh.”

I didn’t care if it was pathetic. I could barely move, so I gathered all my strength to twist my body, crawl like a dying caterpillar, roll, and somehow get off of the metal rails.

This deadly train had probably been used to transport Bright Cross soldiers around the tunnels and it did not have any obvious lights.

And there were no brakes on this train, you moron.

“Ah.”

I had no idea what the gloomy Voodoo Bokor tried to say.

A moment later, the space was filled by that steel hammer.

A tremendous wall of sound struck my body. To be honest, I couldn't see the instant of impact. The man's body disappeared like a movie with frames missing. The train continued down the tunnel, just about hit Ayumi as well, and sent Sagawa Akemi's swollen body flying into the darkness.

After it had completely vanished into the black, I finally heard the screeching of its brakes.

"...Ayu-...are you okay...?"

"Fugu. Did you do that, Onii-chan?"

I more or less crawled toward her voice.

I hadn't had time to worry about whether that would be considered justified or excessive. I didn't know how my actions would be judged the following day, but for the moment, I was thankful I had survived.

...Oh, right.

Where had my smartphone ended up? Had it been crushed by the train's wheels?

"Onii-chan, there's a light flashing over there."

So it survived.

The tingling in the back of my mind gradually faded. I took a deep breath, slowly stood up, and grabbed the rectangle of light Ayumi had mentioned.

"Maxwell, I want to find the Voodoo doll containing the Class Rep's soul. I'm sure the Bokor and Sagawa Akemi were smashed to pieces, though..."

"Warning."

The text on the screen completely ignored what I was saying.

"I did not activate the brakes. Something else caused the train to stop."

A moment later...

It was like a sticky liquid had been poured into my ears. My spine froze. I

heard an odd noise, but I couldn't even turn around to look.

It was like my entire body had rusted over.

Once I gathered so much strength I thought each of my joints was going to snap, Ayumi and I slowly – truly slowly – turned around.

You're kidding right?

This has got to be a joke!

“...”

A loud tremor came from the darkness. A giant silhouette had toppled over. The motion had been a lot like a manhole cover being pushed up from below.

A train. That was a train, right? It had to weight dozens...no, hundreds of tons. While I would prefer to not have killed them, this was not much of a relief.

Was it the Bokor himself or Sagawa Akemi's changed form?

Either way, was legit Voodoo really this incredible!?

“Ayumi, you run away...”

“Onii-chan!?”

“Maxwell, electrify the third rail at our feet. Blow past all the limiters so it'll shock someone even if they aren't directly touching it. I don't care if the power rail breaks from the heat, just roast them!!”

I had no idea if this would work. I even had a suspicion no “physical method” would work.

But I couldn't do nothing.

I couldn't allow him to attack Ayumi or escape to the surface with the Class Rep's doll.

I could accept anything a Vampire or Zombie might do. But I couldn't ignore someone who turned people into products and sold them. If someone with that kind of power escaped, it would be a tragedy for everyone!

“Bring it on, Evil Spirit! The guy who did that to you is right here!!”

A great pressure clearly reared its head in the darkness.

...Looking straight at it might be enough to shatter my soul...

My heart pounded at the thought.

And just then...

I heard a quiet sound.

It reminded me of a noisy midsummer night. But wait. This was...?

*Bzzz.*

*Bzzzzzz.*

*Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.*

“Flies...?”

I muttered the word when I saw some large silver flies buzz right past my face.

This was not just two or three.

There were 50, 100, 200...no, even more!? The swarm of flies filled the space with the force of a silver sandstorm. They appeared from behind me and charged toward the Voodoo monster lurking in the darkness!?

“Wait, Onii-chan! Don’t touch them!”

Ayumi realized something and raised a shrill cry.

“These aren’t normal flies. This is either a Kudlak or a Strigoi. Either way, it’s a carrier of deadly disease. It’s a Vampire just like Onee-chan!”

“?”

I was more confused than surprised. Ayumi said this was the same as Erika, but I couldn’t see anything in common.

This large swarm of silver flies was not biting or scratching anyone. It simply swarmed around the monster in the darkness like a silver river.

But it was quite effective.

I heard a sound like rotten fruit falling from the branch and splatting against the ground.

And that was all.

That Voodoo monster who had survived a direct hit from a train lost its form. It dissolved and fell apart. Its flailing arms and legs fell away before it could even cry out in agony.

...Oh, so that's it.

“Are they intentionally creating unsanitary conditions to hasten decomposition...?”

Ayumi was a Zombie Archenemy, but her skin looked like it would repel water and her body smelled like a girl. But she had to maintain that state. She spent a lot of effort worrying about temperature and humidity, she periodically received injections of preservatives, and she had stitches across her entire body.

This river of silver flies was the opposite.

It was like throwing a corpse into a sauna so full of steam it was hard to breathe. They carried tons of putrefactive bacteria, they created a hothouse like how honey bees used their gathered body heat to kill hornets, and they trapped the victim in that sticky cage before delivering the finishing blow.

“...”

There was no sign of it left.

There was only liquid there. It reminded me of the urban legend of an old man who died in his reheated bath and was found as a stew.

The swarm of flies slurped up the liquefied Voodoo Bokor. Was this more like a Vampire?

It was not fresh blood. It had been allowed to rot just enough to match the Vampire's tastes. Just like a connoisseur who preferred fermented wine or cheese.

Finally.

Truly finally.

I had been unable to move or speak while watching the barbaric act unfold,



but a slender figure rose before me. No, the silver flies had gathered together to form it. When the mass of filthy thin-winged insects scattered again, a small girl with jewel-like eyes, short silver hair, and a black military uniform stood there. She wore the baggy black jacket like a dress and thick synthetic fabric covered her slender legs for an odd sense of unity.

Only then did I realize something.

Someone lay collapsed at this girl's feet. It was Sagawa Akemi and the Voodoo Bokor. Both their bodies were intact.

"That was the same as using a certain variety of maggot to break down and sterilize a putrefied wound. I am a fuse for putrefaction and unclean foods, so it is entirely within my power to selectively eat only the contaminated portions."

...Come to think of it, the Vampires in legends were said to have done a lot of bad things, but wasn't spreading infectious disease one of those?

"I prefer not to show such discretion in a kill-or-be-killed battle, but I must not leave a poor impression on the younger brother."

The military uniform girl in a flat hat spoke in a singsong voice and casually tossed something my way. I hesitantly caught it and found it was a doll made of wheat. It was a lot like raw bread dough, but it actually reproduced the forehead and glasses.

"Younger brother, I recommend you leave that with the Queen. She will know what to do."

"Brother...?"

"My apologies. I forget to name myself. I am Fly Villiers."

She removed her hat, slowly bowed, and spoke with oddly smooth enunciation.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, younger brother. And younger sister as well. I should have introduced myself in the proper manner, but I was forced to compromise due to the urgency of the situation. Please forgive me."

"Eh? Huh?"

"I can explain in detail later."

With her head still elegantly lowered, she looked up at me with a challenging look in her eyes and spoke clearly.

“Please pass this message along to the Queen: The 13 Eastern European Families are starving for a chat over bloody tea.”

## **[crucial notice] From the Notes of a Certain Hunter [on the pinup board]**

The 13 Eastern European Families. There is little information on their origin and the number of people belonging to them, but they form an international organization with great meaning for Archenemies. They are known as the 13 Eastern European Families, but we must question whether they are really based in Eastern Europe and whether they really have 13 leading members.

The central figure is said to be a Vampire known as a Queen, but things changed once she was captured by the former Bright Cross. Instead of seeking independence, Archenemies as a whole began attempting to fit in to human society.

Some say the Queen allowed herself to be caught to influence public opinion among the Archenemies and some say she did it to infiltrate the Bright Cross and analyze the humans' Archenemy combat technology, but opinions are too mixed to find any concrete details.

The organization is officially said to have broken apart upon the Queen's capture, but when you gather the witness accounts found in the gaps of history, you can see a large presence there instead of small remnant groups.

Not much is known about how the Vampires of the 13 Eastern European Families separate themselves by rank, but it does not appear to be a simple meritocracy. Based on accounts from those lucky (or unlucky?) enough to encounter these living legends, the word "curse" can be found hidden in almost everything they say.

# Chapter 4

## Part 1

The sun had fully set.

That meant it was her time to shine.

“E-Erika.”

I climbed my home’s stairs and approached a room on the second floor. I knew a light knock on the door wouldn’t get an answer at this time, but it was still the polite thing to do. I knocked a few times like it was a good luck charm and then reached for the doorknob.

“I’m coming in, Erika.”

After a final warning, I slowly opened the door.

...Her room was so elegant it barely felt like it was built the same as mine. It also had a sweet aroma. She did not have all that many things, but each individual one was tasteful. There was a desk, a dressing table, a closet, and an accessory case. Instead of just maintaining her appearance, it felt more like dressing herself up was a hobby. It was a mystery how she applied makeup when she was not reflected in mirrors, but maybe a mirrorless camera would work.

Regardless, it was the queen-sized bed with a canopy that drew the eye.

She was just really good at using space. If Ayumi and I were given an identical room with identical furnishings, we would definitely run out of space when arranging it all.

But I was not here to review her room.

I walked to the large bed. No one was lying on it and there were no wrinkles in the sheets, but that wasn't what I was focused on.

Below the bed was what mattered.

The entire bottom was made into a single large drawer, so I inserted the gold key Erika had given me and grabbed the handles with both hands. When I slowly pulled forward, it became apparent the bed was actually a luxurious coffin lined with scarlet velvet.

The sweet aroma grew stronger.

Our perfect big sister, Amatsu Erika, was sleeping inside with her delicate eyelids shut. She was like a secret treasure hidden there. Her gorgeous golden ringlet curls and white skin stood out. If the gentle curves of her large chest had not been slowly rising and falling, you would have thought she was a work of art. And why was my explanation so much more detailed there? Because she was only wearing a see-through negligee! My focus was dragged there whether I liked it or not!!

I was hesitant to touch her exposed shoulders, so I started by using my voice.

"E-Erika, the sun has set."

"...Hh, nh?"

"Wake up, Erika. I have something fairly important to discuss with you."

"Hh."

Why did every one of her breaths have to be so cute and alluring!? And all she did was lie there without even reaching out a hand!? She was a Vampire with 20-times the strength of a human. If she grabbed my cheek, I would be dragged into the coffin with no way of preventing her from going back to sleep!!

Finally, her eyelashes fluttered like the wings of a butterfly drinking nectar and her eyelids opened.

"Oh, Satori-kun. Good evening."

"Yes, good evening. I know this is sudden, but this is the Class Rep. A person

in a military uniform said you could do something about it if I gave you the wheat doll.”

That was why I was restraining myself so much in front of my defenseless negligee sister! I couldn’t do anything careless in front of the real Class Rep!!

Meanwhile, Erika still looked sleepy, but she managed to silently rise from the coffin.

“Satori-kun, there are two things I would like to ask you.”

“Yeah, I had Maxwell run through countless conversation simulations, but it sounds like there’s no way to keep you from being furious with me, so I’m ready for it. Bring it on.”

“...Since you have Class Rep-chan’s doll, I take it you and Ayumi-chan left your defenseless big sister behind and went on a rampage, you bastard.”

“I’m really afraid of where this is heading, but I know there’s no escaping it. So I’m sorry! But there was no way I could wait until night!”

“No one likes an impatient gentleman. Now, question two: who is the person in a military uniform? I certainly hope it isn’t a girl with short silver hair dressed in black. Yes...about this tall.”

“Yeah, that’s her. ...Western names are so hard to remember. Flay? Fly? Yeah, that’s it! Fly!”

“ ... ”

“Someone named Fly Villiers is here to see you. Um, she said something about the 13 Eastern European Families. But, Erika, don’t you have your night classes?”

## Part 2

The silver fly girl in a black military uniform actually rang the doorbell and waited at the front door until I answered the intercom.

“How do you do, younger brother?”

“...I’m surprised. I thought there would be a sudden blackout before you crashed through the window with the full moon in the background.”

“This is the Queen’s abode, after all. Moreover, it is against Vampire etiquette to enter a home without an invitation from a resident.”

That was a thing, wasn’t it? Wasn’t it because the fear of Vampires came from the fear of a cult secretly spreading through your city? In other words, it was a metaphor for secret gatherings at graveyards and abandoned buildings and for proselytizers showing up at your front door.

“Sure, come on in. Erika should be fully awake by now.”

“Oh? She can show off that side of herself here? This should be a fascinating conversation.”

The way she seemed unsure whether or not she should remove her shoes at the entrance had a very European feel to it. I led her to the living room.

I saw a silver glint in her slender right wrist. And it looked more functional than a simple silver accessory.

“I’m shocked. A Vampire is wearing a cutting-edge GPS watch?”

“Younger brother, Vampires have many weaknesses: we cannot enter homes without being invited, we cannot cross flowing water, and we are weak to sunlight, silver weapons, and ash wood stakes. With our weakness to sunlight, knowing exactly when sunrise and sunset will occur is crucial. It is best to protect yourself with the latest gadgets. Then again, the Queen sticks with the basics and has more antique tastes, so if you see her as the standard, this might

indeed look unusual.”

“Hmm.”

A few things stood out to me.

“Why do you call her the Queen? I seem to recall a test tube labeled that in the Bright Cross’s facility too.”

“It is one rarity of Vampire curse. Queen and King Vampires stand at the very top.”

“Um, are those two different things?”

“Of course. In the world of the immortal, the same sort of monster can have very different traits depending on whether they are male or female. An Abominable ‘Snowman’ and a ‘Snow Woman’ (or Yuki Onna as they are known in this country) are entirely different, are they not? Either way, that is not something that affects me.”

“...Are you saying Erika is even more amazing than that fly thing you did in the tunnel?”

It was true she caused an artificial asteroid strike in the simulator, but what would happen in a legit battle against Fly? To me, it didn’t seem that simple to figure out.

Then the black uniform girl laughed and gently pointed out my error.

“Not everything is decided via pure physical strength.”

“?”

“Vampires blend into human society and build up their strength that way. So a balance is crucial. We must maintain an appearance that fits human beauty standards while expanding our great power. In that sense, Meslayate and I are somewhat inferior as we tilt the scale more toward power than beauty.”

Fly adjusted her flat hat and, for a brief moment, her eyes glittered like complexly-cut brooches. Or like an insect’s compound eyes.

She had said it herself, but it may have been a kind of psychological defense. And like a pro baseball player watching competing chefs, a human like me could



not tell just how delicate an issue this was. I had no idea where the landmines were, so I decided it was best to change the subject.

“Oh, right. Speaking of clocks, don’t smartphones automatically sync with the accurate time? The weather apps tend to be way off, though.”

“We of course use those as well. But this is our lifeline, so we would be in trouble if we lost or forgot the phone. It is better to have multiple gadgets and one you can ‘wear’ is best.” Fly, who at least looked adorable, smiled. “This watch automatically sets itself to the local time, which is very useful. Some of us insist on Swiss or German watches, but when it comes to electronics, you can’t beat ‘made in Japan’. They are mass produced with uniform quality and they are highly effective at a decent price. And as long as you know Japanese, the customer service is more friendly and polite than anywhere else.”

The silver fly kept heaping on the praise. She may have been one of the foreigners who was completely taken in by this country’s way of treating customers like gods.

“Come to think of it, I never thanked you for saving us today.”

“Do not bother. I was only hoping for a good story to make up for rudely visiting without a gift for the Queen.”

“That was during the day, so how were you wandering around the city?”

“Every building in the city is connected underground. Bugs can hide anywhere and they are made quite tough.”

We found Erika seated on the living room sofa. She was already dressed, but... huh? That wasn’t her usual gothic lolita dress. For the most part, it was a black dress with a red corset pushing up her large breasts, but the material was thick, the long skirt was opened wide in the front, and her slender legs were covered by shiny black leather pants. She would have looked at home holding an electric guitar.

She looked even more gorgeous than usual, but she also seemed to be hiding the practical weight. Cloth, leather, and cotton. When used right, those materials were no laughing matter. Just like a riding suit or the protectors worn over the arm when training police dogs, she may have been focused on the

ability to stop impacts or a blade.

...But why?

Had me lifting her skirt hit her so hard that she felt the need to be fully equipped even at home?

But she also seemed sharper than normal.

“It has been too long, Queen. Heh heh. I am honored you would dress up to greet me.”

“I have little time. Keep it short.”

“Yes.”

They did not ask for details while smoothly completing the exchange with the bare minimum of interaction. They were like two gears with their own predetermined roles. I could tell they had spent time together that Ayumi and I had not been a part of. ...That made me feel a little sad, but I used all of my teenage pride to keep it hidden inside.

Also, Erika said she had little time because dad and mom (a former Archenemy researcher and a legit part-time cashier Demon Lord) would be home soon, but how much had that silver fly researched our family?

Both Erika and Fly looked like they had a refined palate, so I doubted any tea or coffee I could make would earn a passing score. And times like that called for a smoothie. Just by tossing some fruit in the blender and switching it on, you would have a luxurious and healthy drink. And as long as you used good ingredients, the flavor would be the same for a veteran or an amateur.

“Here you go.”

“Oh, how polite.”

While seated across from Erika, the military uniform girl held a black-gloved hand toward the glass and a swarm of fat flies immediately gathered around the edge. She claimed she was having it spoil to the perfect extent and I knew it had to make sense to her. I got that!! But our guest glass had become a bug-catching bottle with a mystery gelatin inside!!

“Satori-kun. When serving the silver fly, always use disposable paper plates,

paper cups, and plastic convenience store utensils. She seems to think you can make anything classy if it ferments a bit, so keep that in mind.”

Erika sounded exasperated.

Fly seemed to be happily enjoying the sticky sweetness(?) like a rhino beetle sucking up tree sap during a midsummer dawn, but then she began speaking.

“I will get right to the point. It concerns the incident your younger brother ran across. I refer to those who intend to rebel against the gods on a physical level.”

“You mean the Echidna who hijacked and rewrote Absolute Noah and the Voodoo Evil Spirit?”

When I interrupted while still on my feet, Erika breathed a soft sigh and elegantly crossed her legs on the sofa. Since she wore black leather pants, I heard the rubbing of leather from the base of her legs. But why did she have the look of someone whose ally had discarded the wrong tile in a game of mahjong? She also patted the seat next to her with a black-gloved hand.

...Was she telling me to sit there and stop giving unnecessary hints?

Fly giggled quietly while watching me hesitantly obey. I had not put any carbonation in her drink, but the contents of the clear glass were bubbling.

“Precisely. They are not a single organization. You could call them a Hidden Cloud that binds together several groups.”

“Hidden...?”

“Yes. Of course, I doubt they have taken a form that the authorities of any nation could track. It feels more like the different embers sputtering around the world have recently joined together to spread fires in several waves.”

The black uniform girl turned her gem-like eyes alternately between me and Erika.

“We have also detected Sun Offering, which links a Central American cartel with Aztec rituals, and Witch Dance, which fuses Western European brokers with forest witches, but that honestly does not really matter. We have nipped those threats in the bud before they manifested themselves in a way that would reach the Queen’s attention.”

...She hinted at some frightening things.

I just hoped she was not acting on the logic of a delinquent.

“So what’s the problem?”

“Well. ...The problem is the 13 Eastern European Families.”

I felt like the air solidified a bit.

“Do you mind if your younger brother hears this?”

“You should have asked that before mentioning the term. Satori-kun can search the entire world two-and-a-half times over with just a keyword, so there is no point in knocking him out now.”

“My apologies.”

Fly removed her flat hat with one hand and bowed so smoothly I could only imagine she had planned it this way.

“Then, younger brother, the 13 Eastern European Families is exactly what it sounds like: a Vampire community centered in Eastern Europe. The format is based on that of a coven and its primary activities are creating a register and supporting our noble lifestyles.”

“Hm?”

What was this? A register and noble lifestyles?

I had assumed a Vampire organization would be after world domination.

Fly Villiers giggled.

“Those are both important tasks. We Vampires require human blood, but if we suck less than a lethal amount, they will not die or be transformed into a Vampire. But even if we only intend to suck a little, a human can still die if multiple Vampires end up targeting the same one.”

“Ah.”

“So it is necessary to register the names of whose blood you have sucked so others will not target them a second or third time. We require humans, so we do not want a chaotic pandemic that covers the entire planet. And the creation of the register is not disconnected from human society. The high society of the

nobility is not strictly necessary, but our system was built in a very different age when 24-hour convenience stores and family restaurants did not exist. At the time, the cities really did go to sleep early. The primary activities that overlapped with a Vampire's active hours were noble evening parties." The silver-haired uniform girl lightly shook the glass of entirely changed contents. "By living the elegant life of nobility, we Vampires have marked ourselves as a step above other immortals."

...Hmm, come to think of it, I didn't know why Erika wore her blonde hair in ringlet curls. And it was true Vampires had a different aura from other Western monsters like Werewolves and Trolls who lived in forests or caves.

"That said, such a fulfilling lifestyle naturally requires money and the ceremonies differ between era and region. To learn how to acquire a variety of items, we must maintain contact points with harmless humans. Keeping the perfect distance like that is quite difficult. ...Oh, and it was the Queen who suggested using animal meat, wasn't it?"

"Meat? What are you talking about?"

"Before modern cars and refrigerators were common, fresh ingredients were a luxury in urban areas. Even at specialized markets, buying meat not preserved through smoking or salting carried the risk of food poisoning. And we Vampires are the experts when it comes to draining the blood to help preserve the freshness of meat and fish. Humans cannot hope to compare. That proved to be an excellent commodity we could acquire and manage within our own territory. And since humans cannot turn down a luxury, we were able to semi-officially join noble high society."

...But wait.

She had mentioned some old-fashioned things like noble evening parties, so...

"If that's true, then how old are you really, Erika?"

"Ahem! I am a high school girl and I will hear no further questions about it."

Erika quickly corrected me.

I was pretty sure Ayumi had been smaller than she was now when we first met, so did they just stop growing at some point?

The military uniform girl of unknown age smiled gently at me.

“It was a bit of a problem when the alchemists had their popularity stolen by our unnaturally long-lasting ingredients and accused us of using devilry. The blood draining was pure technology, but it is true we are undead. It was not easy dodging those accusations while keeping our identities secret. Anyway.” Small Fly paused for a second. “You can think of the 13 Eastern European Families as a group in which the Queen, myself, and 11 others have created a register of humans to efficiently manage the blood-sucking of the entire organization.”

“Hm. So even though it’s a Vampire organization, it’s really just 13 people?”

“Yes, at the smallest unit.”

“?”

“The 13 Eastern European Families is a single group of 13. ...But there are more examples of the same framework than you would think. Just as grimoire authors like to use the same names as all the others, if you simply follow that name in the history books, it might look like we can teleport or time travel.”

Slender Fly giggled, so it was possible someone had mistakenly thought precisely that at some point.

“Different groups are shallowly linked by invitation and we will at least share our registers and rate each other’s noble lifestyles. Having external eyes on you is the best way to ensure you keep yourself looking beautiful, but we cannot afford to mistakenly give away our identity while surrounded by dangerous humans. Before heading out to an evening party in disguise, we must have someone safe to practice on.”

“Isn’t that overly complicated?”

“It is because we have been hedged in by this system that so many Vampires continue to keep up an air of nobility even in the modern age of skyscrapers made of reinforced glass and concrete. Now, let us set aside where in the history of the different 13 Eastern European Families our group falls. We are a secret society with no set base and we are hidden in multiple countries, so we do not want an excessive number of members. We desire human blood, but we

do not wish to chaotically expand the number of Vampires. That is the purpose of the register and our noble lifestyles. Unfortunately, a large number of members would be too much to handle and the nature of the group would change.”

“So it’s easiest when it’s a single group of pals who are close enough to keep an eye on each other?”

“Indeed. Also, you must not forget that each of us is a powerful source of infection. As long as we keep enough of a distance that we cannot all be eliminated in one fell swoop, we can prevent a large human group from wiping us out.”

Fly gave a snort from her small nose, but Erica cut in with her crimson corset lifting up her large breasts.

“One correction: I have already left my position in the group. I am not relying on your precious register.”

“Unfortunately, you are still considered a member, albeit a retired one. A Queen’s extreme beauty and power is quite influential, so you hold a lot of value for the 13 Eastern European Families. We will never have someone else take your spot and I would not allow it if the others tried. Yes, no matter who it was.”

That final emphasis was quiet but powerful.

“Um.”

I wasn’t sure if I was allowed to join the conversation, but staying quiet was exhausting in its own way.

“So the 13 Eastern European Families sounds like some old group Erika belonged to, but what about it?”

“I was getting to that.” The baggy uniform girl snapped her black-gloved fingers. “Like I said, there have been many 13 Eastern European Families from antiquity to the modern age, but not just anyone can start one. There must be 13 members for one, but a new group must receive the approval of all existing groups of 13. Of course, the ones who are not allowed in an existing group and have their new group rejected will generally be so humiliated they start a

dispute with the existing groups.”

“Um, what’s your point?”

“I had believed our group had fairly strong bonds between the members, but some of our 13 are showing signs of siding with the aforementioned Hidden Cloud. Not in a different 13 Eastern European Families but in our 13 Eastern European Families. It would have been nice if this was a product of my overly suspicious mind, but we cannot be so optimistic at this stage. Can *they* really be found everywhere?”

Had it always been that way?

Or had they been influenced into it at some point?

The source of a Vampire’s power was apparently a curse. When someone violated a powerful taboo in lifestyle or burial, they were cursed by god and forced to forever wander the world of the living. So was it really that surprising that one of them would view the gods as an enemy and want to take action against them like the Echidna and that Bokor?

“We’re talking about a group of people who want to rebel against the gods, right?”

“Indeed.”

I wasn’t sure what “the gods” really meant. It didn’t seem to have any real weight to it. I felt like I was watching someone staring at a set of scales while they did their best to try to measure the weight of the soul. Of course, if all the gods were like Valkyrie Karen, I might be interested in joining this Hidden Cloud.

“For the Echidna, it was resentment for her killed children. For the Bokor, it’s pure greed. Then what is it for the 13 Eastern European Families? Why would they want to disturb their organization in order to join the Hidden Cloud? Why throw out their entire life to rebel like this?”

“That I can’t tell you. You would have to ask the traitors themselves.”

...Well, I suppose so.

“But Vampires were never protected by god. Every Archenemy has its own self-definition, so whoever is doing this may not need a reason. It may be that



they see no reason *not* to do it.”

Fly sounded almost careless. Was that because she had nothing more than speculation, or was it because a conflict with her companions was unavoidable regardless of the reason for it?

Erika asked a question with her legs still crossed in their tight black leather pants.

“How many?”

Were we just talking about two or three people here? That would be enough of a threat. We were talking about people who sat at the same table as the silver fly who had taken less than a minute to fully incapacitate that Voodoo monster that shrugged off being hit by a train.

But this was something else entirely.

The slender girl in a black uniform licked her lips. She chose her words carefully before speaking.

“They like to use prepaid cellphones and second addresses, so I do not have individual names. However, based on the lifestyle rhythm seen in the location and timing of the transmissions, I can predict the number of people who are hunched over and secretly contacting the Hidden Cloud behind our backs. There just aren’t as many signals flying around as in this country. Of course, there is a possibility it could be a single person making it look like a greater number.”

“Get to the point.”

“Yes, Queen.”

This time, Fly Villiers gave an actual answer.

“Of the 12 not counting you, I predict the split is 4-to-8. We are outnumbered 2-to-1.”

“Wha-...?”

Even Erika sat up from the sofa.

My throat went dry. 2-to-1. They had lost control of 8 whole Vampires. The situation was entirely out of Fly’s control. A worldwide outbreak could happen

at any time!

“That is why I came to discuss it with you, Queen.”

“Discuss? But even with her, it’s 5-to-8. You’re still outnumbered!”

“Yes. The 13 Eastern European Families generally make decisions through discussion, but if anyone is dissatisfied with the outcome of a vote, a physical conflict will break out. However, brute force is not effective when outnumbered, so the votes are still important. For example, there is no chance of overturning a 12-to-1 decision. In other words, this is a very bad situation.”

Fly was prepared for a fight. She did not naively believe persuasion was an option.

And if her side was suppressed, the Hidden Cloud side could do whatever they wanted. The majority would wash away the minority. When would a pandemic begin in this city to settle things with Fly’s group?

“But things are different with you. Right, Queen?”

“...”

Erika’s expression silently changed. It looked much bitterer than before.

“Eri...ka?”

“Queen. Might I explain to your younger brother to eliminate his concern?”

At the black uniform girl’s insistence, Erika took a slow breath. And she gave a heavy nod.

“Younger brother. We are Vampires. The difference in numbers is indeed great, but it is not an insurmountable obstacle.”

“What do you-...?”

I trailed off as I felt a twinge of pain like a thin fishing line was squeezing my heart.

“Are you saying you’re going to bite people!?”

“That is always an option.”

“...”

How could I wipe that composed look off of her face?

“I am a silver fly who allows fresh blood to rot so I can enjoy its aromatic fragrance. I do not mean to brag, but I am an oddity even among Vampires.” Fly smiled in a gentle way, but it also exposed her sharp fangs. “Meanwhile, if I were to bite you and suck out all of your blood, the odds are low you would inherit the silver fly. You would likely become a normal Vampire. Younger brother, this is a rude question for someone who has spent so much time with the Queen on a daily basis, but do you know is the source of a Vampire’s power is?”

“A curse.”

It was not much of a question when she had mentioned it herself earlier.

“Correct. We are either the unclean who were cursed by god after violating a taboo in our birth, lifestyle, death, or burial, or we were attacked by the source of such a curse. Thus, the victims are merely cursed by god for breaking the major taboo of ‘losing one’s life to a blood-sucking villain’ and who did the blood-sucking is of little relevance.”

“...I’m not sure you can describe any Vampire as ‘normal’. And I’m not interested in pushing you two away, but I can’t overlook it if you try to trigger an outbreak in the middle of the city.”

“Let me preface this by saying we will not do that. Now, a pandemic might look frightening, but it is actually difficult to use one in an effective way in a battle between Vampires. If one side starts an outbreak, the other side must do the same to fight back. But the difference in the initial number of infection sources will remain unchanged, so the minority cannot overcome the majority’s production rate. So if our outbreak were detected early on, the 4-to-8 conflict would only have grown to 40,000-to-80,000 and we would still be outnumbered.” The girl with short silver hair paused for a beat. “However, the Queen alone is a little different. You could say she has a special curse inside her. Just like the Kallikantzaros or the Varcolaci, there are abnormal mutations that are extremely rare even for us. They only have their blood sucked, but they receive a curse very different from blood sucking. And this is something not even Amatsu Erika can predict.”

“You mean you would have to keep repeating the process until you got something other than the major blood sucking curse? In other words, until you had a vampire with a curse as ‘useful’ as Erika’s or yours?”

I recalled in the simulator when Erika had produced an irregular Vampire called an Upior that could move around during the day and kill people with the ringing of a bell. Those were traits Amatsu Erika did not have since she was weak to sunlight like normal.

However...

“That’s just leaving it up to luck!”

“Indeed.”

“Would it take hundreds, thousands, more? During that sisterly fight in the simulator, how many irregular Vampires turned up after drowning an entire city in blood? Are you going to use up people’s lives en masse like an adult buying trading cards in bulk!?”

“But the Queen was counted as the foundation of our fighting force in the past. If you do not get her on your side, you will suffer a serious upset.”

...Really?

Overturning everything with a secret weapon wasn’t logical or methodical and it ignored any kind of flowchart. Wasn’t it just flipping over the tea table? So even if Fly looked composed, she had to be panicked. She was clinging to a legend. I of course was not going to let Erika do that. I couldn’t help but focus on the smartphone in my pocket.

Depending on the answer here, things could change a lot.

Concerning what I would do about this silver fly, that is.

“Also, there is no need to steer in that direction.”

But Fly remained relaxed on the sofa.

“We need not start an outbreak. The Queen need not act. In fact, it would have the greatest psychological effect if she remained silent throughout.”

“?”

“If she joins us, it will turn us into a black box. The Hidden Cloud side will not know how many enemies they have or what kinds of Vampires they must fight. The 4-to-8 structure will become a thing of the past and they will be forced to gather information from scratch.”

“Oh, I get it.”

“It is not a problem as long as we have a means of buying time. We create an environment in which they will not attempt to use the power they have. While they hesitate for fear of stirring up unnecessary trouble, we can isolate each of their members and defeat them 4-to-1. Or rather, it would be a problem if they could see through our plan.”

...It made sense.

But could Fly Villiers stay true to her bluff to the very end? If the Hidden Cloud side felt no impatience or fear, they would let their numbers do the talking and wipe out her side. Would she really not press Erika to start biting humans if that happened?

“Are you sure the Hidden Cloud side will be that scared? They outnumber you 2-to-1, right?”

“That is the entire point. Betraying the organization carries an inherent risk. Outnumbering us eliminates that concern, so that should be a major reason why they are working together here. It is because they have the advantage that they do not want to be eliminated from their game of musical chairs. That will create some hesitation. No one wants to be the first one.”

Erika finally settled back down on the sofa. The unique rubbing sound of leather came from the butt of her black pants. She also crossed her arms below her large chest and sighed.

“But the Vampires on the Hidden Cloud side are members of our organization. They should know my traits.”

“Yes. They too will attempt to eliminate the risk of an unlikely defeat by luring you onto their side,” said small Fly Villiers. “We are badly outnumbered, but nothing is set in stone yet. And the biggest fear there is having everything thrown into a black box by your presence, Queen. Do you understand the

gravity of the situation now?”

## Part 3

Things were not looking good.

“Fuguu...”

When I stepped out onto the balcony late at night, I found someone already there. It was my little sister Ayumi who wore her long black hair in twin butter rolls.

“I’m so confused.”

“That’s about right for a Zombie. Intellectual work doesn’t suit you.”

My joke elicited a dramatic “fuguu!” in response.

When I was little, I had thought the planet switched off for half the day, but now that I had grown (or at least my self-consciousness had) and started thinking of myself as an engineer, the night was not that strange a time. In fact, if you counted the time I spent working in my room, I probably knew it better than the daytime.

Had I wanted to conquer the night by messing with machines? Had I wanted a “power” like Archenemies had?

“The Hidden Cloud ties together organizations on the level of the Echidna who ruined Absolute Noah and the Bokor who runs that black market. ...Is another sign of the Calamity approaching?”

The Calamity was a possible end of the world feared by the ark. It referred to a time when a line was crossed, humanity’s morals dramatically lowered, and too many simultaneous crimes, riots, and wars occurred to be contained. It was like a pandemic of malice. It was unknown what would directly trigger it, but seeing serious moral hazards like Evil Spirit rising to the surface was apparently a sign of danger.

And Absolute Noah was no longer functioning.

That was a good thing from my personal perspective, but would humanity as a whole agree with me? Especially with the threat of the flood approaching.

“So now that Hidden Cloud thing is taking over Onee-chan’s old group?”

“Yeah, the 13 Eastern European Families they called it. To be honest, they didn’t give me many details, but I feel like that may be for the best. Having 12 more people like Erika in just this one group and having them fight over who gets her on their side sounds like a nightmare. I’d probably faint if I learned more.”

“If getting Onee-chan on your side lets you win even if you’re outnumbered, she sounds a lot like a goddess of victory or something. Fuguu. Her image is always so clean and pure.”

Erika herself had gone to the night school like usual. Perhaps fighting an extreme moral hazard required fighting the temptation to do nothing on special days like this.

I didn’t know where the silver fly had gone.

Or Valkyrie Karen for that matter. I had been too preoccupied with the military uniform girl to think about her.

...How many Archenemies were there in the city I could see out there? And how many sinister plans were underway? Of course, the dangerous ones were only a small fraction and those sinister plans were only a nuisance for people like Itou Helen the Witch or Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf.

“This isn’t looking good, is it?”

“No.”

I readily admitted it.

For one thing, it was hard to say we had actually defeated that Bokor and overcome the dark underground on our own. If Fly had not visited us there, I may not have been able to protect my little sister. Not to mention rescue the Class Rep. The odds were much better I would have gotten myself killed.

And the incident brought to us by the silver fly clearly went beyond Evil Spirit. I had not leveled up, yet I was being thrown onto the next field or into a new



dungeon. It was obvious I couldn't get by with trickery and I would be eliminated quite spectacularly before long.

I may have needed to prepare myself.

Since my own skill was not up to the task, I would have to make some sacrifices to make up for what I lacked. What could I offer up and what could I protect with that? I couldn't just wait for an opportunity to show itself. I was already having trouble keeping up and it was only going to get worse from here on.

It was the same as a disaster.

Fly Villiers had not brought a fearsome prophecy to us. We had to count ourselves lucky we knew the storm was coming in advance. It was valuable information. The future would be determined by whether or not we could make use of it. I couldn't just shut my eyes, tremble, and repeatedly insist it wasn't possible.

At the very least, I couldn't afford a repeat of what happened in the darkness deep underground. I couldn't just watch helplessly while the occult struck down my little sister.

I would not rely on Fly next time.

I would not repeat that mistake.

"..."

That was when a soft light flashed to the side.

It was the neighbors. That was proof that time had returned to a previously dead room.

That was enough to blow away the oppressive atmosphere that felt like being buried below the thick bedrock.

Ayumi narrowed her eyes kindly while leaning on the balcony railing.

"But I guess no one can say you did the wrong thing."

"Yeah."

I didn't know what exactly my stepmom and older sister had done, but you

couldn't argue with the results. The Class Rep's soul had been removed from the wheat doll and returned safely to her original body.

Even if I had to redo my life 100 times, I would go to rescue the Class Rep every single time. So I couldn't regret that I had run across Evil Spirit and gotten entangled in the 13 Eastern European Families mess.

It had already happened, so I had to focus on how to overcome it.

After getting my mind back on track, my body finally remembered how cold it was. I held my shoulders.

"Ayumi, I'm going back in. Don't catch cold, okay?"

"Fugu."

I wasn't quite sure if that was a yes or a no, but I returned to my room all the same.

And as soon as I did...

"Phew, guess who's finally back? Man, today was rough..."

...Not again.

The person sitting cross-legged on my bed and scattering her nice smell everywhere had apparently never heard of giving people a little warning before visiting! Also, we had just been out on the balcony and I doubted she had used the front door and walked through the house in that armor and miniskirt, so how had she gotten in? The other window facing the Class Rep's house!?

"Gods always appear when you least expect it."

"They say the same about demons," I retorted.

"And why are you so surprised? I'm relying on you here, Satori-san. I mean, we're talking about networks and clouds now, which are your specialty."

"...So that's what it's about."

"The Echidna and Evil Spirit were no more than two of the Hydra's countless heads. My goal is to root out the Hidden Cloud itself to stop the global Calamity. So I wanted to do you a favor in advance so I could use you your excellent computer skills. That was the plan anyway. Ta ha ha. But a certain Vampire got

there ahead of me.”

...That raised a question.

If it had been the Valkyrie instead of the silver fly who had come running in that underground tunnel, what would I have done? Would I have continued to say how much I hated her but still felt indebted to her for saving my little sister and the Class Rep?

“What are you going to do now?”

“Good question. Do you still intend to fight, Satori-san?”

“...”

I had solved the Class Rep issue.

I really wanted to withdraw before I overextended myself and got burned, but both sides of (one of?) the 13 Eastern European Families were after Erika.

In that case...dammit.

“Let’s settle this as quickly as possible. But I’ll only help out with eliminating the Hidden Cloud’s influence from the 13 Eastern European Families and setting it back on track.”

“Very well. Nee hee hee. To be honest, that is quite fortunate. Military might is really the only card I have to play.” Karen’s smile was extremely worrying. “So now that we’ve confirmed each other’s intentions, how about we get down to business?”

“?”

“Oh, come on. The vague term ‘13 Eastern European Families’ isn’t enough, right? We need specific information to know who to attack and where they live.”

“...So you’ve already decided it’s going to be an attack? You’re like a living bomber plane, aren’t you?”

“Um, what did you think a Valkyrie was? We live for war.”

Anyway.

I had an idea where to start. Fly had said she knew the number of people but

not their identities due to the use of prepaid phones and second addresses. I didn't know how the 13 Eastern European Families maintained solidarity, but assuming they did not converse telepathically, they would have to have a mailing list or online group to support their community. I needed to check that, create a list of members, and work out which ones were in the Hidden Cloud group.

According to Fly Villiers, her group was already outnumbered 4-to-8.

"You'll be starting with Fly, right?"

"You know about her too? Well, she is the only member I know. Erika has apparently already left, so I can start by going through her acquaintances to list up-..."

"Non, non. Not what I meant." The goddess on my bed suddenly cut me off and explained. "Which side is Fly Villiers really on?"

## Part 4

...Wait.

That was certainly a possibility, 4-to-8 odds were bad even for Russian roulette, and nothing was stopping her from being on that side. But...wait... but...

“It couldn’t be.”

“Why not?”

“If the silver fly was with the Hidden Cloud group, she would have no reason to tell Erika she was being targeted! Or to reveal the 4-to-8 number!! Couldn’t she just pretend nothing was wrong and then attack Erika while she was sleeping or something!?”

“What if Fly Villiers does not know what the other 11 are doing and does not know who will contact the Queen first? Instead of lying and arousing suspicion, wouldn’t it be better to earn some trust by telling the truth?”

“But...oh, right. What about Evil Spirit? If Fly is part of the Hidden Cloud, then she’s on the same side as the Bokor, right!?”

“The Hidden Cloud really just binds a few independent organizations together. I doubt she would care much about anyone who was not a part of her own group. Besides, Satori-san, have you forgotten what I said?”

“What?”

“Why was I trying to fight for you? Did I just want to help retrieve Class Rep-  
chan’s soul from Evil Spirit? ...It was obviously because I wanted to earn your trust despite any conflicts in our past.”

“...!?”

“But that didn’t work out thanks to Fly stealing the best part. Hey, Satori-san?

Why did you invite in a Vampire you had just met and argue that she couldn't possibly be an enemy? Doesn't that impactful meeting seem a little contrived to you?"

...Now that she mentioned it, it had been like a cheap pick-up artist technique from a skit. You send a rough-looking guy to bump into a young girl and then the supposed gentleman swoops in to save her and earn her trust. But unless someone else pointed it out, it was hard to tell you had fallen for such a trick.

Fly had saved us without killing the Bokor or Sagawa Akemi because she had not wanted to leave a poor impression on me.

Wasn't that what she had said!?

"I mean, she would be trying to trick their Queen. Who would be more familiar with that cultish fear of a force spreading below the surface?"

A cult.

Yes, a cult!

Hadn't I noted that Vampires needing permission to enter your house was a metaphor for proselytizers!? Why had I been so stupid as to assume I wasn't falling for the same thing!?

I-I couldn't find anything to say!!

"Ahhh, ahh, ahhh, mahhh!!"

"Ha ha ha. Don't worry. Everyone reacts that way when they find out they've been conned. You're perfectly normal, so get back on your feet already."

"Ahh! Ahh! Ahhhhh!!"

I was so embarrassed I shoved my face in my pillow and thrashed around on the bed, but I realized the pillow had changed shape thanks to Karen's shapely butt. That meant I could not escape reality even if I wanted to.

I could only speak up with a tremor in my voice.

"Wh-what am I supposed to do?"

"Let's see. If I used my newlywed body to comfort you, you'd be well on your way to falling for a cruel and inescapable marriage scam☆"

“Mahhhh!!”

“If you don’t want to be tricked again, then start thinking for yourself and being proactive instead of just going with the flow. First, think about the 13 Eastern European Families which is based on a coven. Well, this is just one such group, but whatever. Information on it is hard to come by since it’s a lot like a secret society, but I know the identities of 3 who are here in Kukyou City. And that’s 4 once I add Fly.”

“If they’re all on the Hidden Cloud side, then we’ve already identified half of them.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t know if they are or not. I’d say Fly probably is though.”

“Probably? Got any actual evidence?”

“Ah ha ha. You’re not serious, I hope. We’re not arguing this in court and this isn’t turn-based combat where the enemy will wait for us. If we don’t take the initiative at every opportunity, we’ll never make any progress.”

In that case...

“The best way to shake them out would probably be to send the 3 whose identities we know and see how they react to Erika, who we know is clean, and Fly, who we think is guilty.”

“Yes.”

“At the same time, we check anyone who contacts the known members. If we can identify the rest of the members like that, we’ll have the whole picture.”

However...

Simply identifying the enemy was not enough. We were talking about Vampires here. Not only did they have superior physical strength, but they could take over people’s souls and bite them to increase their numbers. Based on the simulator, the apparently needed to suck a lethal amount of blood and could not spread explosively with a single bite like Zombies, but we still could not let our guard down. It would be bad if there was an outbreak in the city.

Would the Valkyrie’s strength really be enough then? It was possible Karen would be overwhelmed if the 8 members of the Hidden Cloud group decided to

settle things by simultaneously spreading their infections. Fly had claimed there was almost no risk of that happening, but I couldn't trust what she said anymore.

It sounded like we had to end this before the people of the city were used as pawns as a pandemic turned them into an army.

But...

That was simple enough to say, but how exactly would we do it? In the simulator, Erika and Ayumi's rampage had been enough to destroy the city, but this would be 12 or 13 of them! Could we really manage all of this while staying a step ahead to keep them from doing that!?

"M-Maxwell!"

"Ehh? Coming out of sleep mode is such a pain. (p\_-)zzz"

"Don't sulk just because I haven't been talking to you. You don't need that kind of functionality! More importantly, I need your help. Please lend me your knowledge!"

"Sure. You should have just relied on me in the first place. (•ω•)ノ"

"And you're surprisingly simple. As your father, I'm a little worried." I breathed an exasperated sigh. "I want to stop a Vampire community known as the 13 Eastern European Families from devouring Kukyou City. I don't know their identities, locations, or whether or not they're part of the Hidden Cloud group. But we're short on time. What do you think I should do?"

"Honestly, asking me to run a simulation without first entering the preliminary conditions is a truly abnormal command, but Miss Erika is the final hope for the loyal members of the 13 Eastern European Families who are outnumbered 4-to-8, correct?"

"Yeah."

"Then no matter how powerful these Vampires are, the side that wants to finish off the other side and the side that wants to make a miraculous comeback will be unable to afford displeasing Miss Erika. Can't you use that to your advantage?"



“How exactly?”

“User, you cannot channel the occult, so the answer will not just fall into your lap. Try watching their reactions. If neither side can ignore Miss Erika, the meaning of contacting them will differ.”

...Watch their reactions.

...The meaning of contacting them.

...Neither side can ignore her.

“I see. But we don’t have time to send a message to each individual one. Plus, we don’t know who most of them are. We can’t pinpoint their address.”

“Then can’t you use a service that does not require an address?”

“Hm.”

I thought for a bit and then raised my head. I remembered we had an incredibly powerful monster here.

“Karen.”

“Yes, yes. What is it?”

“I want to borrow your knowledge as well. I want you to debug a death game by checking the rules for holes. I want an expert to double check it all.”

## Part 5

I stayed put until close to dawn waiting for Erika to return from her night school and then I immediately discussed it with her.

We used a video site.

She was an incredibly sexy person, but she did not like showing off her beauty to people she didn't know, so convincing her took some doing. That's what you got with someone who seriously wrote "a lovely wife" on her future plans form. She was probably more Yamato-ish and Nadeshiko-y than your average Japanese person.

But in the end, I was aiming a camera at the study desk in her room such that it only captured her hand writing out several letters. ...It was true this hid her face, but I wasn't about to tell her it made it look more like an indecent video chat. It would be a problem if my cute older sister puffed her cheeks out right now.

She of course also spoke.

"To my beloved brethren. I may have left the table for a while, but your Queen is sending you an invitation."

Most everyone in the world would have no idea what the video meant.

"Come tomorrow at midnight, I will make my wishes known to you in the special conference room on the top floor of the Starlight Kukyou multi-purpose building. I would like a show of good faith from both sides of your split ranks: the Traditionalist side and the Hidden Cloud side."

But those in the know would understand.

The soft and cold voice, the black-gloved fingertips barely showing up in frame, the large bust emphasized by a crimson corset, the long blonde hair in ringlet curls, and even the wooden desk and the wallpaper were hints. Based on

Fly's reaction, that outfit was a familiar one to the 13 Eastern European Families. The Vampires lurking in this city would know their fates were riding on this, so they would be staring intently at the video and quickly analyzing all the data within.

"You may enter the party room any way you like. Just make sure you do not anger me. I will support whichever side is present in greater numbers. The current split is 4-to-8, so members of the Traditionalist side will earn two points to make it fair. And as this meeting is meant to measure your good faith, your side will lose points for every unnecessary trick you attempt. The final count of points is all that matters."

We were turning a battle into an event.

We were setting up a death game with real lives on the line.

...This was the answer I had reached with help from the simulator and from Karen, the planner of the Colosseum.

The 13 Eastern European Families was currently split 4-to-8, but Erika's actions could change everything. So no matter where they were hiding in the city, the members of both sides could not afford to skip this. They had to send all of their members to ensure the other side did not outdo them and take Erika.

We didn't need to go on a treasure hunt. Not if we could set up circumstances in which they would gather on their own.

And Erika had used the vague term "good faith". That sealed off any destructive tricks such as biting a random human to send in their place or using the locals to build up a Vampire army just in case.

All the true members would gather unarmed in one place. Even if they thought it sounded fishy, they were not allowed to step off the rails. They were bound by invisible chains.

...This would prevent the city from being chaotically drowned in blood for the time being.

The next problem was how to deal with the double digit number of monsters once they were gathered together. It would be bad if we had no way of

knowing which ones had been corrupted by the Hidden Cloud. We only had one shot at this. It might become necessary to incapacitate enemy and ally alike.

In other words, it didn't matter which side they were on. We just had to take care of all 12 of them.

Amatsu Erika made her final statement.

"Everyone. I hope you will make an effort to participate with good faith and sincerity in your hearts."

## Part 6

But the reaction to the video arrived far faster than we had expected.

By which I mean, word of it reached Amatsu Yurina in less than 15 minutes after it was posted.

...Oh, honestly! The people from that ridiculous coven structure of the 13 Eastern European Families weren't the only ones who would recognize Erika's voice, her handwriting, the desk in her room, and the wallpaper. Of course her own family would!! Why was I so stupid!?

"Fuguu..."

"Satori. Stop copying Ayumi's mannerisms. You're her big brother, aren't you?"

It was 5:30 AM, which was earlier than the daily breakfast preparations. I had been captured and forced to sit on the living room floor.

...Now, I could accept that Erika wasn't here with me. I had been the one to convince her to do it and she had to be in her coffin before sunrise. But no matter how much I surreptitiously operated my smartphone, Maxwell would not respond. And whatever happened to Valkyrie Karen!? She wasn't just a passive accomplice! She was more to blame for this than me, so where had she gone!?

Meanwhile, my stepmom stood in front of me with her boobs resting on her crossed arms.

"Satori, can you guess why I am angry?"

"Heh, eh heh heh. You feel left out of this major event, so you're trying to compete with Erika and Ayumi at your a-...bwah!?"

She hit me with the sofa's kitty cushion. That sounds cute, you say? She was a legit Demon Lord. And even water or tofu can be deadly weapons if swung

around with enough speed!!

I honestly thought that horizontal blow was going to take off my head.

“If! You know! This isn’t a problem you can handle alone, then don’t get involved in the first place!! The weakness of your heart is obvious enough from the fact you went crying to Erika for help, Satori!!”

“Wait, you’re swinging it back and forth!? Hbh, you’re really going to knock my head off!!”

She kept hitting me for a while.

“Now, is there anything I can do to help?”

Then she asked that.

She was really good at switching modes, but it could sometimes be hard to tell what was supposed to be a reward and what was supposed to be a punishment.

“By the way, mom, what’s going on with Absolute Noah these days?”

“The Echidna left the inside of the ark such a mess that the organization is close to falling apart. You could maybe think of it as a physical version of ransomware. No one knows where she is now, so it might be faster to redo everything from the ground up. ...If the Calamity will kindly wait that long.” She sighed. “It’s falling apart on the inside and we had earned enough grudges to have a lot of external enemies. But on the other hand, a single large event could bring everyone back together. For example, if someone suggested stopping the Calamity by destroying the Hidden Cloud which had caused all our problems.”

“ ... ”

Hm.

In that case...

“That might be difficult. Our plan to summon the 13 Eastern European Families to one place is counting on the element of surprise, so our biggest fear is having them catch on in advance. If a big name like Absolute Noah shows up with an unknown number of pawns on the game board, we’ll have no way of predicting who will do what.”

“...What if I acted on my own?”

“You said yourself you’ve earned a lot of grudges. If word spread that you were walking through a back alley without any kind of bodyguards, we couldn’t predict what external forces would interfere. Stay a part-time housewife for now, okay?”

Amatsu Yurina breathed a very sensual sigh.

And then a voice escaped the gap between her soft-looking lips.

“I feel so useless...”

“Frankly, I’m impressed I can still live a normal school life with everything that’s going on. Has dad found a new job yet?”

“It’s enough of a problem for a parent to have their children worried about such things.” She began rubbing her temple with her slender index finger.

“Listen, Satori. If you logically think you can win this and you aren’t just acting on emotion, then I will step back and not let my emotions take over. All I want to do is increase the odds of your survival.”

Then she bent over to move her face in close and poked my nose with the finger she had been rubbing against her temple.

“However, never forget that you have access to the ultimate switch to destroy everyone’s plans. If your method starts to work against you, I will not hesitate to intervene. No matter how much that screws with your plans and distances you from the conclusion you imagined.”

She did not seem to be joking. After all, this was the person who had weighed her family against the planet’s 7 billion people and chosen the former.

There was only one thing I could say.

“I’ll do my best.”

“So does everyone.”

My stepmom had an immediate response to that as well.

And she added one last statement.

“And yet the world has always been headed in the wrong direction. Enough so

to invite the Calamity.”



## Part 7

It all came down to midnight tonight.

What did we need to do before the 13 Eastern European Families arrived?

“I’m ready to go at any time.”

It wasn’t even worth asking how that Valkyrie had gotten here. She was on the school roof during lunch despite wearing blue armor and a miniskirt.

...It was true she was our strongest fighter against all those Vampires. There was also Itou Helen the Witch or Kuroyama Hinoki the Mermaid, but I couldn’t let them get hurt.

We were badly outnumbered and it was best not to drag those girls into a losing battle.

If I was going to ask for their help, I would have to find a safe area for them and calculate everything out so they never left it.

“Just to be clear, we’re only interested in incapacitating them. They’re all my sister’s old acquaintances, so we can’t just slaughter all the suspects.”

“I don’t really care either way, but I guess I’ll do as you say. After all, my target is the entire Hidden Cloud, not just this one 13 Eastern European Families.”

“?”

“Do you not get how this is different from the Echidna or Evil Spirit?” Karen gave me a somewhat provocative and mischievous look that seemed to be testing me. “The 13 Eastern European Families have yet to be fully corrupted. The Hidden Cloud is still working on them. ...That means we might find some information not found in the previous organizations.”

“You mean...?”

“They’re soft, just like a freshly molted crab. Their loyalty and data security won’t be perfect. And if the 13 Eastern European Families is still skeptical, they’ll want more information to search out the truth of the Hidden Cloud. So if some of that internal information is left behind...”

...That fleeting cloud would start to seem more real. She could list up all the organizations composing the Hidden Cloud and deal with them all at once. I doubted it would actually be that easy, but it still might function as a handhold on an otherwise sheer cliff face.

After some thought, I shook my head.

“Sorry, but I’m going to focus on the threat before my eyes, not that grand plan of yours. If we don’t stop that 13 Eastern European Families, it’s all over. I can’t afford to leave anything in reserve. Letting the future distract me is meaningless if the city ends up drowning in blood because of it.”

During that sisterly Archenemy fight in the disaster environment simulator, Erika alone had been enough to destroy the city. And she hadn’t altered the parameters with anything akin to cheat codes. That meant she could do the same in reality. But I couldn’t allow that to happen to the real Kukyou City.

“But what exactly will you do?” asked Karen. “Leave it to me and you’ll end up with a life-or-death battle, but individual Archenemies like Erika and Ayumi are only so strong. I’m not so sure they can overwhelm a double-digit number of Vampires without killing them.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“More importantly, you’re the person who took issue with the Colosseum and ended up driving the Bright Cross to destruction even though it had roots in more than 100 countries around the world.”

“Again, I’m aware of that!”

I repeated myself like I had lost my temper. It felt like having my stepmom ask over and over if I had done my homework. Now, what kind of look was that warrior widow giving me?

While half-sulking, I childishly pouted my lips and said more.

“That said, I’m not a manga protagonist. I can’t unlock some hidden power in a pinch, so I’ll have to take on these legit Vampires with what I already have on hand. And we’re talking about a dozen of them.”

“So what exactly will you do?”

“You know my field of expertise, don’t you? Maxwell.”

“Honestly, are you quite done flirting with that widow goddess, you unfaithful boy. Yawn... (:3Jz)”

“I’m not even listening to your nonsense anymore. It’s about time to start with our tricks. ...Let’s hack the Vampire world.”

## Part 8

The night wore on.

The promised time was approaching.

...The weather was clear.

This would have been easier if it was raining, but I had to make do with what I had. It was time to get started.

Erika would have already changed into her special outfit, the gothic lolita dress, and made her way to the meetup point at Starlight Kukyou. The plan was to capture all of the gathered 13 Eastern European Families and question them, but none of them would show if Erika was not there. That prevented any tricks on that front.

However.

“Fugu.”

“Ayumi, I know how you feel, but no biting Karen.”

“But, Onii-chan, wouldn’t I be doing the world a favor by biting and taking control of that wicked woman?”

“You’re a Zombie, not a Vampire, so you can’t control the people you bite. And it wouldn’t be okay even if you could.”

“Fuguu...”

She puffed out her cheeks more than necessary, so she must have been quite upset. Still, she managed to restrain herself.

And the powder box named Karen had this to say:

“Now then, now then. Let’s do this as planned. Don’t worry, Ayumi-chan, this plan was drawn up by Satori-san, so there’s no room for my malice there.”

“...Mh. That’s fine then.”

“And that means you can’t blame me no matter what happens. If this blows up in our faces and some precious lives are lost, send all your complaints and opinions to Satori-san!!”

“...Onii-chan, I really think I should bite her.”

“Stop it, Ayumi. You’ll screw everything up!”

We could not move as a group either. We split up and approached the multi-purpose building along separate routes.

I doubted this would turn into a grand adventure since we weren’t leaving the city, but there was still a chance of being attacked on the way. We had explained the rules, but there was no guarantee everyone involved would do the rational thing.

I had asked Erika to stand in front of her old group as a victory prize, so I couldn’t allow this to fail while she was there. No matter what, I had to avoid a mistake that allowed all the Archenemies relying on me to be captured.

“Maxwell, are you ready?”

“Sure. Everything is ready. However, the enemy targets have too many unknown factors to accurately calculate the risk.”

In all likelihood. 99% odds.

No matter how certain it seemed, there was always a risk of it immediately devolving into a head-on clash or just having the bad luck to run into a random mugger, murderer, or rapist on the streets. And no matter how unfair it was, it was all over for us if anything went wrong.

“Younger brother.”

“Kh.”

My shoulders jumped a bit when a soft voice called out to me on the dark road.

It was the Vampire with short silver hair and a black military uniform: Fly Villiers.

And if Karen's theory was correct...

"Wh-what? Oh, Fly?"

"Even if the Queen insisted on good faith, you are being careless. The 13 Eastern European Families are split between the Traditionalist side and the Hidden Cloud side. And I believe I already explained that we are outnumbered 2-to-1."

Letting her know what I had realized would not end well, especially given the overwhelming difference in strength. So I needed to act naturally so she would not notice anything was off.

"Hee hee. It feels so odd to be able to confidently enjoy Kukyou City's night. Not long ago this was the Bright Cross's most heavily guarded fortress. I suppose it is a sign of how fleeting things are in the human world."

...She told me in no uncertain terms that my ideas were no more than idealism. My face tensed and, the more I told myself to act natural, the less I knew what "natural" even meant. After all, as skinny as she looked, she was still a Vampire with 20 times the strength of a human. There was simply no way I could defeat her. How was I supposed to maintain a poker face against a monster stronger than construction machinery? It was like I had a steamroller bearing down on me!

"Younger brother, are you attending the event as well?"

She of course meant the meeting tonight. It almost seemed like she was implicitly asking if I had planned it all...but no. I was being too suspicious. I had to stop assuming the worst. Erika had urged the Vampires to make a show of good faith. It was simple enough to think they would actually treat me quite well in the hopes of earning bonus points. Right!?

"Y-yes. Erika says she's going to make up her mind on her own, but I'm still worried."

"I can see how you would look at it that way. In that case, I will accompany you."

...If Fly really was on the Hidden Cloud side like Karen predicted, then this was actually quite a dangerous situation for them as well. She could easily defeat a

human like me, but attacking me could turn Erika against them. And if I panicked and attacked the silver fly without thinking of the consequences, the difference in power could be so great she would have trouble stopping me without killing me. Just like using an industrial robot arm to play catch with a raw egg. So she would be trying to keep me in a good mood while working to control me the best she could.

Even weakness could be a weapon if the conditions were right.

Of course, you had to be careful since it could not be a shield, but I had been well aware what my weapons were when I came here.

This was fine.

My pulse was still a little fast, but it was calming down now that things were kicking into higher gear.

“Fly.”

“Yes?”

“How long have you been a Vampire and what caused it?”

I spoke to her while we walked down the night road to the multi-purpose building near the subway station.

...I doubted that was a pleasant memory, but I went there anyway. Fly Villiers could not afford to lose my trust, so she would have a hard time refusing to answer. I wanted to bother her just enough to keep her from trying to control me while not enraging her either.

She pulled her flat hat down to cover her eyes – almost like she was trying to hide her true thoughts – and she asked a question of her own.

“I asked this before as well, but what do you think is the essence of a Vampire?”

“The curse.”

“Indeed.”

My immediate response did not faze small Fly. She may have been afraid of an accident occurring because the military uniform girl actually waited for the

crosswalk light to change even though there were barely any cars at this time of night. And she continued speaking while she waited.

“If you break a taboo during your life – be it how you were born, how you lived your life, how you died, or how you were buried – god will curse you and you will become a Vampire. So if you do not want that to happen, you must obey the rules.”

“...Are you saying you weren’t bitten by anyone?”

“Blood sucking is just the most obvious example of a taboo. And that applies to those who attack others to suck their blood and those who actively offer their blood to someone. But as you guessed, my origin is related to a different taboo.”

“?”

“Let me warn you up front: this is not a pleasant story.”

The crosswalk light turned green and we safely crossed the road. But that safety was entirely reliant on the rules, so I would be killed instantly if a complete stranger decided to ignore the traffic laws.

“In my case, it was the consumption of unclean food. My luck ran out when I was born into an age of famine. I lived by fighting over fly-infested food with other children who lived in similar circumstances. But the final ‘feast’ I so desperately fought for ended up taking my life, I was left out in the open without even being buried, and so many flies covered my body that it looked like a single silver mass. I was born from the adultery of my criminal parents, I broke food taboos in life, and I was not properly buried. That was three strikes. And the world seemed to think it was appropriate for someone who ate unclean bugs to be eaten by unclean bugs. Ta ha ha.”

“...”

I just about came to a stop in the middle of the intersection.

It was worse than I had imagined.

This was nothing like the elegant nobility of the night you saw in classic literature and that Erika dressed like. But had Fly meant anyone any harm in



that story?

We tended to glorify stories of battles against Vampires or Zombies, but you were still attacking the victims and rubbing salt in the wound. I felt the same bad aftertaste I felt from the Little Match Girl.

Fly, on the other hand, continued crossing the intersection as if it were all perfectly normal. It was almost sad how little it bothered her.

“Each member of the 13 Eastern European Families has their origin in a different curse. From Elizabeth, the peak of the historical Vampires, to Yuri, the Kudlak who was cursed as a Vampire simply because he was born wrapped in an oddly-colored amnion – no two of us are alike. I know it can seem strange, but the blood-sucking taboo is not all there is to Vampires. So despite calling ourselves families, we do not always have successors. Although that may have something to do with our lack of lifespans.”

Elizabeth and Yuri.

Remembering those names sounded like a good idea and I quickly caught up to the small back in a black uniform.

Of course, it was always possible this was all a lie and no one by those names existed.

“Unclean foods, glorification, immaturity... We tend to concentrate and enhance the curses within us. You could call us a gathering of new, unknown sins which have yet to blossom into the dark flowers of deadly sins. We are the well-fertilized dirt that has yet to go supernova and expand the current 7 peaks to a maximum of 20.”

The Seven Deadly Sins.

That made me think of those extraordinary beings like the Leviathan of Envy or Lilith of Sloth. And my thoughts turned to the baseless idea that this explained why Amatsu Yurina was the mother and Amatsu Erika was the daughter.

As we approached the shopping district near the subway station, the sidewalks grew busier and the stars faded from the night sky.

The silver-haired girl with a baggy black military jacket and synthetic pants held down her hat with a hand and looked up at the incomplete night sky.

“Just as all the stars twinkling in the sky are collections of gasses and dust in space, we must search for our own purpose once born into this world. Even if that purpose is no more than fluff or sand to the one who designed us. That is the essence of the 13 Eastern European Families who were cursed by god.”

Why would someone trample on their old organization, oppose their former companions, and throw out a stable life in order to join the Hidden Cloud and rebel against god?

I kind of got it.

The outline was still vague, but I felt like I had sensed a faint core of meaning there.

It might be foolish to seek relief in the words of someone who was likely an enemy. There was a chance she was just planting the seeds of unnecessary suspicion in my head.

Nevertheless, I asked within the crowd.

“...Then that’s true of Erika too?”

“You would have to ask the Queen herself. I do not intend to act like Ruthven, but that information is not mine to reveal. But do not worry, younger brother. The day will come that she will confide in you. I can tell from the look on your face when I told you the story of my unclean food.”

...I didn’t have a mirror, so I didn’t know what look that was. What kind of dumb look did I have when lives were on the line?

Fly covered her mouth with a black-gloved hand and giggled as she walked by my side.

“That should be obvious, younger brother. Not once during our conversation here have you attempted to rely on your precious smartphone. If you had tried to cheat, you would have only given me the cold civility spat out by an optimized algorithm.”

“ ... ”

Come to think of it, why hadn't I?

The answers would be right there in my pocket.

Fly was suspicious. And scary. I knew that, but had some part of me wanted to take on this Archenemy without any tricks? But without Maxwell (and even with Maxwell), I was only a powerless high school boy.

"We have arrived, younger brother."

At some point, the silver fly who represented unclean food came to a stop.

We had reached one of the high-rise buildings near the subway station: the Starlight Kukyou. That was the one-night stage for those who had struggled to shine and be known as stars no matter who said they were merely dust.

"It is just about time. The Queen and our allies are waiting."

"Yes." I looked up and added one thing more. "This is where it really begins."

## Part 9

The Starlight Kukyou.

It was a large building near the subway station, but I had honestly never really been inside it. As the vague title of “multi-purpose building” suggests, it had no predetermined stores like a department store. It primarily rented out space in this prime location for offices, studios, conference rooms, galleries, event locations, stages, trunk rooms, *etc.* While I was satisfied with digital media for most everything, Erika had gone there to view solo art exhibits and Ayumi, who was learning vocal music at her high-class girl’s school, had gone there to enjoy operas or musicals while taking a nap.

At the moment, they were holding an exhibit of tropical fish from Okinawa.

“There we go.”

The building had automatic doors on all four sides, but I stood in front of the slope to the underground parking garage and held my smartphone over the card reader to unlock the shutter.

The silver-haired black uniform girl sounded impressed as she watched the collection of special steel bars rise.

“That certainly is convenient.”

“It isn’t my ability. I’m reliant on Maxwell for everything.”

“I would like to say creating an all-mighty flask makes you perfect. (´ω`) Heh heh.”

“Now you’re complimenting me as a roundabout way of praising yourself, aren’t you?”

I had already confirmed that the security cameras in this area had their wiring removed. In other words, they were only for decoration. ...Rather than cheaping out on security, it felt more like someone had intentionally left a hole to allow

in and out someone or something they wanted no records of.

...But it looked like I was the only one using this entrance. How had Erika, the rest of the 13 Eastern European Families, Ayumi, and Karen gotten in? Well, those extraordinary people could just climb the walls and enter through the roof. Even that Transylvanian count was skilled at scaling cliffs.

Late at night when none of the events were underway, the parking garage was as dark as a hospital at night.

Erika had said to meet at the conference room on the top floor. That was about 30 stories up, so I pressed the elevator button and waited.

“Maxwell, send a message to Erika. Tell her Fly has arrived.”

“Sure. It seems Miss Fly will be the last to arrive.”

The automatic door opened with a soft tone and revealed a cramped elevator which was as bright as a convenience store at night. The bright fluorescent lights were reflecting off of the aluminum interior, so it blinded me a little.

I stepped inside with the silver fly and pressed the button for the top floor. The door closed, an uncomfortable floating sensation surrounded me, and we were now inside a strange silver space that would produce the same popping sound as a kitchen sink if you simply leaned on the walls.

...Now.

“Fly.”

“Yes?”

Why had I called that small Vampire’s name here? Given what I was about to do, I had to avoid having her catch on at all costs.

And yet I had called out to her. I was apparently easily influenced. I was the one springing a trap, but had I felt a need to play fair or something?

“Sorry.”

The elevator ground to a halt with an unnatural heavy sound and then the annoyingly-bright fluorescent lights went out.

All I had to rely on in that narrow cage was my smartphone’s backlight.

“Younger brother, what is this!?”

“You should already know, Fly. I can’t let you all reach Erika. I will defeat the Hidden Cloud here, and that includes you who they’ve corrupted.”

“ ... ”

I felt like a pair of jewels was faintly shining in the darkness. Fly Villiers was the silver fly who would one day become a new deadly sin. She may have revealed her true self and gained compound eyes. She may have used her paranormal power that, unlike Erika’s, lacked the proper beauty to blend into human society.

“Younger brother.”

Did I not immediately try to smooth things over because I had accepted that this ruler of rot and pollution was an enemy?

“To remain in the Queen’s favor, I will be as careful as possible. But no hard feelings if you still die.”

“If you think you can win, then just try it. Maxwell!!”

A heavy noise infiltrated the dark space through all four walls as if crushing it. Had Fly noticed? C’mon, notice it. This is meaningless if you don’t. Think about what it was that caused the elevator to stop!!

Then I heard something moving through the wind.

The sound was heavier than a swinging bat and sharper than a cutting razor. It was not until quite a while later that I realized it was the sound of a black-uniformed arm reaching out to grab my throat.

But that did not matter.

A moment later, someone crumpled to the ground like they had been hit in the back of the head, but it wasn’t me. It was Fly.

“Wha-...?”

“Are you too weak to stand, Fly? Of course you are. You can hear it through the walls, can’t you? The roaring of a waterfall!”

“Younger brother, you...?”

“Vampires cannot cross running water.”

It was a declaration.

This was what mattered most here.

“The large conference room on the top floor isn’t the only space here. And they’re showing off some interesting things at the Okinawan fair: tropical fish. I redirected the artificial seawater being circulated there and remade the elevator shaft into a giant waterfall.”

“Dammit, you’re attacking there!?”

“Even that Transylvanian count was weakened by running water, so he was afraid of being attacked while on a boat. Fly, the greater a Vampire you are, the harder it is to escape this problem. Right now, you’re weaker than a human like me!”

I heard a buzzing sound reminiscent of electric clippers. Her internal balance must have collapsed. Had she separated her entire body into fat silver flies to attack me?

But it was too late.

Had she not considered why I had used an elevator?

“Defeating me would be meaningless. There are no gaps you can use to escape, Fly.”

“!?”

“This is a giant bug cage made of steel. There are no gaps and you would only find a giant waterfall if you did get out. You’re not a carp. A weakened fly can’t climb the waterfall. Get out of here and you will be hit by all that water and dropped down into the artificial underwater lake that was once the parking garage!”

The buzzing of countless wings joined together to make it sound like the darkness itself was speaking.

“Young...er...brother...!?”

If you were at full power, you could probably hit me with the black plague or

cholera.

But.

No, *so*.

I couldn't give you time to use your full power.

"Farewell, Fly. Humans are creatures who will dig up a grave if need be. You knew how crafty we can be, didn't you?"

That was it.

It was like a switch had been thrown. The silver storm reflecting my smartphone's backlight lost the strength to fly and each individual fly dropped to the elevator floor. That silver carpet left nowhere to step.

...Vampires had many weaknesses for an Archenemy.

Fly herself had said so. I couldn't deny they seemed incomplete when compared to Lilith or the Leviathan.

I let out a slow breath and reached into my pocket.

"Maxwell, use the diagram to place markers on the screen. I'll add duct tape weather stripping to make sure not a single fly can get out once Fly comes to."

"Sure."

"Move the elevator to the nearest floor and then I'll step out and seal it up. Then the bug cage really will be complete."

I sealed up the vents and other openings before leaving the elevator. We were on the 14th floor. Yes, the elevator had moved just fine. Also, there was no water inside the shaft.

"That worked better than I expected," I said into my smartphone.

Vampires could not cross running water.

That was well known, but the specifics were not entirely clear. I knew the ocean and rivers were out, but they did not seem to have trouble with a wet road after it rained and they never seemed worried about the plumbing or underground water veins that were not on the map. Erika took long baths, but she did not seem afraid of the shower or tub.



Was it an issue of natural versus artificial?

But Erika had been isolated on a building rooftop in the sunken city after the dam broke in the simulator. So that was not the issue.

“It was their perception that mattered.”

While feeling thankful for the small speakers on smartphones these days, I placed a vertical strip of duct tape down the middle of the elevator’s automatic door to seal it up. I had of course taken control electronically so none of the buttons on the inside would do anything.

“The important factor is the line drawn by the Vampire themselves: ‘I can’t cross water flowing at that speed’ or ‘that much water is too much’. That’s why they’re not worried about being trapped by ubiquitous plumbing or underground water veins that they’re not even aware of. But that also means it doesn’t really matter if there’s really any water there. Whether it’s virtual or an optical illusion, they just have to be convinced from the bottom of their heart that water is flowing through there at a tremendous rate.”

The world’s most famous Transylvanian count had slept in his coffin until reaching his destination when riding a boat across the water. In other words, he had rendered himself unconscious so that he was no longer aware of the running water there.

So...

“The elevator’s inner walls were made of soft enough aluminum to make noise if you merely leaned on them,” said Maxwell. “The 3D acoustic effect using the resonance of playing a water noise from a smartphone micro speaker is honestly not that accurate, but turning out the lights like at a movie theater must have helped immerse Fly in the experience. Being trapped in a stopped elevator hits multiple psychological fears – closed spaces, heights, and the dark – so there is a good chance she could not judge the situation as well as normal.”

It was all a battle of awareness.

Lies and the truth did not matter here. If you just needed to give it realism, going over the top could sometimes help convince someone.

Just like people tended to get motion sickness from nonexistent virtual

experiences.

“Continue playing the water noise from the elevator’s emergency speakers to keep Fly weakened in her bug cage.”

“Sure.”

“As planned, hack the parking garage’s sprinklers. They have a built in pump, right? Once you’re ready, open the valves.”

That said, running into Fly Villiers had been pure luck. One of the traps I had come up with while staring at the Starlight Kukyou’s layout had just so happened to fit perfectly. If I ran out of tricks and things stopped working as planned, a mere human like me was done for.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

“Let’s attack the real strength of those Vampires using nonexistent virtual bullets.”

## Part 10

Now, a question.

When people were inside a high-rise building with windows that did not open, how did they check on the weather outside?

“I have taken control of the emergency alerts for the three major carriers,” said Maxwell. “I am sending flash flood warning emails.”

That might sound complicated, but the system was actually full of holes. That was obvious enough from the frequency of false alerts. There was no need to enter the strictly-guarded main server of a major IT company’s headquarters when accessing the cheap computer in a local government office was enough to send out a city-wide alert.

“Fly used a normal GPS watch, right? If the other Vampires also rely on convenient modern tech, we can plant some doubts in their heads. And even if they don’t all have phones, the information can spread between them by word of mouth. Okay, Maxwell, let’s deal with the roof now.”

“It would be possible to rupture the water storage tank by altering the internal pressure.”

“We don’t need to go that far. And I don’t want to send all that heavy water crashing to the ground at once. As planned, mess with the settings for the rooftop garden sprinklers and create some artificial rain around the sides of the building. The winds between buildings should blow the drops back at the windows.”

“Sure.”

Even in the dark hallway, I could hear what sounded like rain blowing against the windows. I approached a window and found the nightscape was indeed distorted by drops of water.

And I saw something when I looked down at the ground.

“Looks like Itou-san and the others are here.”

Itou Helen the Witch, Kuroyama Hinoki the Mermaid, and Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf...

I had asked those girls I knew to stand outside holding umbrellas. The open umbrellas stood out a lot. If you looked out the window and saw the blowing drops of water and the umbrellas on the ground, anyone would assume it had suddenly started to rain.

“It may be late at night, but the sky is clear overhead,” said Maxwell. “This method is not perfect as I was unable to alter the meteorological agency’s database.”

“They can see it happening, so they’ll assume it’s a sunshower. Or a moonshower in this case. Abnormal weather conditions like sudden downpours are becoming more common.”

There were more umbrellas than I had arranged for. Other people must have pulled out their umbrellas due to the sprinkler water.

The wet road was reflecting the streetlights, so it was looking good.

“How about the parking garage?” I asked.

“As planned, the internal pump near the rising slope is running and pumping water down the slope. The security cameras there have had their wiring intentionally removed, so there will be no record of it.”

“Record the footage of the flooded parking garage with a different camera. Use some bannerware that automatically opens and redirects people and then send out the fake video.”

“Sure.”

Just as Fly had worn a watch to know when the sun rose and set, the other Vampires would be sensitive to their weaknesses. They would probably be checking several weather forecast sites, both government-run and privately-run. They would not suspect anything no matter what was placed between sites. And even if a site itself was clean, a nasty banner could infect a mobile

device. They could even send you to a different site that looked identical. To the 13 Eastern European Families, it would look like a sudden downpour outside had flooded the underground parking garage and transformed it into a great torrent of water.

...Vampires could not cross running water.

I had never heard of a height restriction there. If they could just transform into a raven or bat and cross it in the sky, it wouldn't be seen as a weakness.

I took an elevator up to the top floor.

On the way to the large conference room, I found two of them already collapsed in the hall. One was a girl with wolf-like fur in places and the other was an old man in a sailor's suit and a thick coat. I had no idea what kind of fearsome legends those two held, but I wouldn't have challenged them if I thought I could lose. I tied their hands behind their backs with duct tape and also bound their ankles for good measure.

I didn't stop to check who was who and what kind of abilities or traits they had. In the time it took me to untangle all the threads of the 13 Eastern European Families, the damage could spread to the entire city.

If I was doing this, I had to defeat them all with a single action and in a single mission. I of course couldn't give them a chance to strike back.

I did feel a little bad for the 4 traditionalists who had done nothing wrong and showed up despite being outnumbered.

"Erika!"

"Oh?"

When I threw open the large double doors and stepped inside, I saw Erika standing below the bright fluorescent lights in her gothic lolita dress with skintight black leather pants visible below the opened front of the long skirt. The long tables were shifted out of place, chairs had fallen over, and there were other signs of a slight struggle in the large room, but I could see no sign of injury on my older sister whose crimson corset lifted her large breasts.

There were 1, 2, 3, 4 people collapsed on the ground.

“Just 4? There were 2 in the hall and Fly is in the elevator...so are there still 5 left!?”

It only took 1 to start an outbreak.

It had been 4-to-8, but we didn't know who was on what side, so the only way to avoid a pandemic was to incapacitate all of them.

I tossed a roll of duct tape to Erika and she sighed while elegantly catching it in her black-gloved hands.

“Defeating this many budding deadly sins at once will probably get you a new nickname in the hunter community.”

“Who cares. If we let even 1 of them escape, there's no stopping it! Seeing that sea of blood in the simulator was enough for me!”

We left the conference room and returned to the dark hallway.

...Our biggest concern was the possibility of someone leaving the building. Once they found the downpour and flooding were lies, the Vampire-specific placebo effect would disappear. Not only could they reach the surface or the roof, they could also break through a window and fly into the sky. After all, they could transform into bats or ravens. Even the duct tape binding was only effective when they were too weakened to transform.

Like I had said before, there simply wasn't time to figure out each of their abilities and traits to challenge them to a head-on fight. If we didn't deal with all of them tonight, there was no predicting what kind of retaliation we would receive. I couldn't allow that to happen.

“Maxwell, let's pursue them psychologically. Do you think the Vampires believed in the flooding and were trying to escape, or do you think they doubted it and went to check!?”

“Those still resisting should have begun to notice that the inability to cross running water affects different Vampires to different extents. If it was the same for everyone, they should all have collapsed in the conference room. So even if something seems off, the odds are good they cannot escape the trick. Just like someone who wants to go to sleep but cannot.”

“So they would want some solid evidence to rid them of their doubts, huh?”

For us, there were two things we couldn't let the Vampires see: the sprinklers for the rooftop garden and the parking lot that was only flooded by the fire sprinklers.

Also, the conference room was on the top floor. Which was closer: the ground or the roof?

Plus, if it did turn out the parking garage was flooded, the Vampires would be swept away the instant they touched the doorknob. They would be captured by the very running water they wanted to avoid. But even if it was all true, the roof would only expose them to some blowing rain. So it was obvious which one they would check.

...I would be honestly impressed if any of them still chose the parking garage in this situation.

“Maxwell, let's head to the roof for now. Search the blueprint for emergency stairs.”

“Sure. I will display the route on your screen.”

I used the backlight to make my way there, but an internal wall suddenly broke through on the way there. A large mass rolled out into the hallway, but...

“Ayumi!?”

“Fuguu!!”

She replied with an energetic but silly voice, but what was this? One of the traps I had set up must have worked. A child-sized monster was pinned below a sticky mess courtesy of the fire extinguisher I had filled with black tar.

Vampires could not stand the strong smell of garlic and tar. There was a legend of people using tar to draw a cross on their front door to keep Vampires away.

Anyway.

“Okay, that's one down! Did you see that, Onii-chan!?”

“...Yes, I saw you raining down blows on a child-sized Vampire that was

already incapacitated by the two weaknesses: running water and tar.”

“Fugu. He’s apparently known as a Child of Judas. He’s super tough, so I’m worried he might only be pretending to be defeated.”

We discussed it while binding his arms and legs with duct tape.

Ayumi pointed to the bathroom.

“There’s another shoved in there. I think she’s called a Vrykolakas. She looks about my age. Wanna go check?”

“That’s the women’s bathroom, so I’m not going in there with you. Anyway, that leaves 3.”

I looked up the stairs to the roof and saw someone looking at us with both hands raised. They looked like a kind old lady. I could have easily seen her as an elderly teacher.

...But what was she really?

I couldn’t allow the Vampires to spread, so I had set everything up the best I could. Were there really any normal humans left in the building?

“I surrender,” she said.

“Ayumi, be cautious.”

My obvious warning did not change the old lady’s behavior. If anything, she seemed too perfect.

“I only wish to protect the Queen. I know you have no way of telling the Traditionalist side from the Hidden Cloud side, so you only need to capture me here. If you defeat everyone, you can eliminate the threat.”

“ ... ”

It was extraordinary.

But I could not move for a while after she made that suggestion. I hated that I couldn’t trust this expression of good will. Silence continued for a while.

I had seen how frightening Vampires could be in the simulator and that abandoned hospital. Erika was 20 times as strong as a human and Ayumi was 10 times. That meant we could not rely on our numbers or let our guard down in a



direct confrontation. In an actual fight, I would be entirely ineffectual.

First, Ayumi took a step toward the stairs.

Next, I held my smartphone sideways and walked forward while making sure to keep both of them on the screen at all times.

The silence weighed heavily on my stomach. We only had to move a few meters and up 10 steps. But we had to take each step while making sure our focus never wavered.

Ayumi's hand finally touched the old lady's shoulder.

“!!”

My little sister did not hold back. While holding onto the shoulder and elbow, she dragged the Vampire to the floor and pinned her down.

Even as we bound her hands behind her back with duct tape, the elderly teacher voiced no complaint. But she did turn her head sideways in order to look us in the eye.

There was nothing but sincerity there.

“Please...please look after the Queen...”

“Stay here.”

With that, Ayumi and I looked up to the metal door at the top of the stairs.

A moment later, we heard an explosive noise and the thick door swelled out like a balloon. No, its hinges tore and it flew through the air.

There was nothing we could do.

The metal door flew between Ayumi and me like a giant shuriken or guillotine and stabbed into the concrete wall behind us.

Something had happened on the roof.

That was only the side effect. I could tell on an instinctual level.

“Warning.”

Maxwell's message was entirely unnecessary.

I gulped and we walked up toward the roof.

And there we found...

## Part 11

The atmosphere was oppressive.

And there had to be more to it than the smell and dampness of rooftop garden's soil and the sprinkler water. This was something that a human's five senses could not normally detect. No, it was something that should not have existed in a purely physical world. This space may have been filled with that kind of waveforms and particles.

The darkness of night should have been ruled by the Vampires, but it was defiled by the color gold.

That spear and shield may have been symbols of a sun that would never lose its shine.

"Oh, Satori-san. How many have you gotten?"

The greeting was as carefree as someone wandering around the city searching for monsters with their smartphone.

It was Valkyrie Karen.

That blue warrior woman was an embodiment of divine punishment.

A deep sound of running water continued. Metal pipes stood vertically at even intervals. Those were the kind of sprinklers found on golf courses, but a few of them were broken. And beyond that, it looked like an airplane had crashed: several pillars had broken, there was a straight line torn in the soil, and something lay at the end point.

The person that was collapsed on the ground and curled up to protect its face and gut...was something similar to a human.

Based on appearances alone, it looked like a girl with short reddish-blond hair.

I didn't know what she had originally been, but if she was part of the 13 Eastern European Families just like Erika and Fly, then she would have a legend of her own as well as her pride and dignity.

But the way she was curled up, covering her face and gut, and holding out a trembling hand to beg for forgiveness showed no hint of that former glory.

This was a ruler pulled down from her throne.

Two objects glittered on the floor as the sprinkler water started to wash it away. They looked like longer and sharper versions of a human's canine teeth.

They were fangs.

Even if they would regenerate, what did it mean for a Vampire to have those broken by someone else?

...I had no way of knowing who she was or whether she was on the Traditionalist side or the Hidden Cloud side. She may have come here purely out of concern for Erika.

I wanted to identify the Hidden Cloud group and return the 13 Eastern European Families to normal as soon as possible.

I opened my mouth to shake free of those thoughts.

"I trapped 1 in the elevator and 2 in the hallway, 4 had collapsed in the conference room, Ayumi got 2, and we captured 1 more on the stairs. Karen, what about you?"

"I started by responding to this 1 who was closest to discovering the secret. You couldn't let the Vampires see what's on this roof, right?"

"Fugu?"

To avoid accelerating her rotting, Ayumi had stayed by the door without venturing out onto the sprinkler-wet roof, but she tilted her head here.

"But wait. That doesn't add up. 1, 2, 4, 1, 2, 1. And Onee-chan doesn't count. Fugu, that's only 12! We missed 1!"

This building had more than 30 floors, so there were plenty of hiding spots. And since Vampires could transform into rats or bats, searching all of the

hallways and rooms might not be enough to find them.

“But what good is running away for them?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” replied Ayumi.

“Both sides should want Erika on their side. That parameter shouldn’t change even if they were betrayed. Fleeing empty-handed won’t help them if the enemy gets Erika. They’ll have no way of recovering after that.”

“So if they are going to escape, they’ll want some kind of reward, no matter how small?” asked Karen.

“They would need some kind of power to plot a comeback. In that case...”

They might be surprisingly close by.

It was possible we had seen them without realizing it.

I spoke into my smartphone while I thought.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

“Let’s get back to the basics. Do you have footage of when we met Erika in the conference room?”

I looked through that recorded rectangular slice of the past. Erika herself was not what mattered. Nor were the other Vampires collapsed around the room. Yes, I was right. When I watched Erika elegantly catch the roll of duct tape in her black-gloved hands, I could see it behind Erika who wore her combat(?) gothic lolita dress made of thick material and worn with skintight black leather pants. I could see it in the thick reinforced glass window separating the darkness outside from the brightness of the fluorescent lights.

“I was careless...”

“Fugu?”

“I thought just one of them was unaffected because Erika knew about the plan and thus wasn’t fooled. But I was wrong.”

I tapped at a point on the screen.

The light had transformed the window behind Erika into a mirror.

“Vampires aren’t reflected in mirrors.”

“Ah, but there it is!”

“You can see Erika’s reflection in the video. I don’t know how, but there’s only one possibility: there was a non-Vampire in the 13 Eastern European Families and they were pretending to be Erika. That’s why we can see their reflection in the window and why they weren’t affected by the sudden downpour diversion using the rooftop sprinklers and umbrellas on the ground.”

And that led to another question.

“Then where is the real Erika?”

“ ... ”

“Where did they take her, dammit!?”

# **[crucial notice] Draft for an Archenemy Feature Article**

## **[on the pinup board]**

Vampires are seen as the representative example of Archenemies these days, but they were once a minor species that was often confused with and mistaken for other species.

For example, it was Witches that used suspicious spells and potions to transform into animals and fly through the night sky.

For example, it was Incubi and Succubi that snuck into homes during the dead of night and had children with the residents.

For example, it was Werewolves that lived normal lives in populated areas and revealed their true form on nights of a full moon.

You could say the blood-sucking monsters took on the traits of those other species as they became an all-encompassing department store of taboos and uncleanness. They are a jack of all trades that can accomplish anything to some extent, but that has left them with no traits that particularly stand out.

Researchers disagree on which era it was that Vampires rose to stardom, but a major factor was how the Vampires concentrated their taboos and uncleanness (which they probably see as taking advantage of god's curse) and how they distinguished themselves from the other filthy undead by living luxurious lifestyles similar to those of the nobility.

Vampires established a solid social standing for themselves in that way, but that also created the ability to fight back against them.

For one thing, undead beings who seek the blood of the living are not that rare.

Because they can accomplish most things, a demonstration of paranormal powers beyond drinking blood does little to prove whether an undead being is a

Vampire or something else.

Surprisingly, it is possible to run across a category error where everyone assumes someone is a Vampire when they are in fact not. Even the person themselves might be mistaken.

- Focus more on a single central theme.
- Don't get so serious just because this is your favorite topic. If you want to talk about the thesis you wrote while stranded deep in the Transylvanian mountains in your college days, we can go drinking some time.
- This isn't very exciting, so maybe I'll spice it up with a sexy photoshoot. Perhaps a frilly gothic swimsuit on a moonlit poolside?



# Chapter 5

## Part 1

Erika had disappeared.

This was completely unexpected.

We had no time. We had to deal with this as soon as possible.

“Karen, you take care of the 13 Eastern European Families! I’m honestly not interested in who’s on the Traditionalist side and who’s on the Hidden Cloud side. Figure it out however you like!”

“Aye, sir.”

“But don’t kill them or use any kind of torture.”

“I have no real reason to do as you say, but what can you even do if I break my promise?”

“I’ll be disappointed. I’ll think, ‘oh, gods act so high and mighty, but they can’t do anything without relying on violence, can they?’ ”

“...Okay, that I can’t ignore. Fine. It was mostly thanks to you we captured them all so easily and gods can be particular about repaying debts with things like karma and whatnot.”

“Ayumi, come with me!”

“F-fugu?”

I took a confused Ayumi with me as I reentered the building from the roof. We returned to the conference room and it was as I feared. The 4 Vampires

were still collapsed inside, but Erika – or whoever had transformed into her – was nowhere to be seen.

“Maxwell, I’m going to record the inside of the room. Search for anything that might lead us to the next hint.”

“I can see what looks like animal fur here and there. I will highlight it on the screen.”

...Sure enough.

Hmm, was it dog fur? I was hardly an expert since my family didn’t own a pet, but it didn’t seem catlike. It was stiffer than that.

“Examples of Archenemies similar to a Vampire are the Sutriona Witch, the Werewolf, and the Moroi,” said Maxwell.

“What about that fur? It’s definitely not human hair.”

“That would suggest a Werewolf. They are only active at night, they blend into human society, those they kill are turned into an Archenemy, and they are weak to silver bullets, so there are quite a few points in common. In fact, there is a folk belief in Eastern Europe that Werewolves transform into Vampires when they die. It would not be surprising to find both legends have been mixed together.”

“Fuguu. In that case, it wouldn’t matter to them what happens to the 13 Eastern European Families or Vampire society as a whole, right? I mean, they’re not a Vampire, so they’d probably be one of the ones that fell for the Hidden Cloud.”

“...”

Just once more, I looked around the conference room with 4 Vampires lying on the floor.

“Maxwell, send an email to Itou Helen and Kuroyama Hinoki who have their umbrellas open outside.”

“Do you want them to provide witness information?”

“No, you idiot. The situation has changed and I can’t get them any more involved. Tell them to blend into the crowd and get home right away. Oh, but

tell them to take an indirect route and check for anyone tailing them.”

“...Umm. I suppose I will say ‘sure’, but you aren’t trying to win over their maiden hearts, are you? You buffoon(・Д・)”

What? Why?

Someone capable of knocking out and abducting Erika (even if it was a surprise attack) might be walking around out there. How could I put those girls in harm’s way?

“I don’t need everything, Maxwell, but search the entire internet for data concerning Werewolves. I want to know what kind of Archenemy they are.”

“In all likelihood, you will only find sites related to movie reviews, RPG walkthroughs, and party games.”

“Don’t be so sure, Maxwell. Werewolves are one of the more well-known Archenemies. Start by listing up all the formal universities and research labs in the results and then narrow it down to specialist sites and personal statements by professors or equivalent people. We just have to find someone who’s seriously investigating something so silly sounding.”

“You could save a lot of time by skipping the lead-up and giving the machine an accurate command from the get-go. It’s impressive you managed to build me when you feel the need to show off before doing anything. (´ω`) What a pain.”

“...Do you want a front-row seat to your administrator breaking down crying after losing an argument to his own creation?”

“Well, this is hardly the first time I have seen you make everything overly dramatic. You do love pressing the enter key harder than necessary when completing a task after all.”

“Maxwell, do you have to go in for the kill even after I warn you!?”

“Anyway, I am executing your command.”

Maxwell was a reliable companion at times like this. Instead of just using a crawler to search out all the necessary data, that simulator would also judge each piece of data’s value and order it all by priority.

...Now, then.

“To me, a Werewolf feels like a fruit knife while a Vampire is a Swiss Army knife, but what’s it actually like?”

“Fugu. At the very least, they can only transform between human and wolf, right? I don’t think they can turn into any other animals like bats, wolves, rats, ravens, and flies.”

Yes, if the Werewolf attacked Erika and took her from the building, it was unlikely they flew out from the roof or an elevated floor. So we naturally made our way down to search for clues.

Inside an elevator (not the one Fly was trapped inside), my little sister and I looked at my smartphone.

“If you focus on the fundamental fear, a Werewolf represents the fear of your neighbors changing when day turns to night, while Vampires represent the risk of a cult spreading without your knowledge,” explained Maxwell. “While they both are hidden below the surface in densely populated areas, they have entirely different meanings. Also, Vampires seem to have thoroughly differentiated themselves from Werewolves by giving themselves the image of the elegant nobility of the night thanks to Ruthven and the Transylvanian count. If Fly Villiers is to be believed, it would seem Miss Erika and the other Vampires here today had intentionally worked to distinguish themselves from other Archenemies like that.”

“With that many variations, there must be more Vampires overall. In that case, it’s the same as the Kuchisake Onna legend.”

“Fugu?”

“The Kuchisake Onna might seem played out now, but it started as a simple story. That she can run 100m in 3s, that her mouth was the result of botched plastic surgery, and that she can be repelled with bekko ame or pomade were all added later.”

“Stories say the people killed by a Werewolf will become one, but there is no sign of them gaining a large army like with Vampires or Zombies,” said Maxwell. “In exchange, they take no damage from sunlight. All it seems to do is seal away their special strength as an Archenemy.”

“So they’re good at hiding on their own, but they can’t charismatically rule a group,” I said. “Sounds like we don’t have to worry too much about them spreading. Even with Erika as the ultimate trump card, the Werewolf isn’t all powerful. They’ve got to be nervous as hell that someone is going to attack while they’re carrying that prize. They’ll be curled up and trembling alone in the darkness.”

“Fuguu. Then they might leave the city ASAP and bring Onee-chan with them.”

“I’m not so sure. This Werewolf can’t act as a member of the 13 Eastern European Families group any longer, so would they really make such a smart decision? I mean, they won’t know it was us siblings that took out the entire Vampire organization in a single night.”

“Ah.”

“They only know one thing: their enemy is skilled enough to obliterate the 13 Eastern European Families which has survived for centuries. And it wasn’t 4-to-8; their enemy took out all 13 of them, Erika included. Not knowing who did it will probably make them hesitate out of self-made fear. ...Just think about it. If special forces, a criminal group, or some other large organization was after you, would you calmly walk out of the city with a bulky hostage in tow? Wouldn’t you be afraid of someone uploading a photo to a message board or social media or of coming across a checkpoint or ambush? Don’t forget that Kukyou City has limited access due to the ocean and mountains surrounding it.”

“Now that you mention it, you’re right,” said Ayumi. “If I was running away from the Bright Cross, I would never make such a careless choice. I would avoid standing out at all costs.”

“They ran away to avoid fighting, so we know they’re afraid. They should be sealing off their own options while they overestimate our abilities and bind themselves with fear. They’ll be afraid to flee the country or even stay at a proper hotel. And Erika is their final shield, so they can’t treat her too roughly either. Whether it’s done openly or behind the scenes, police dramas and gang movies are enough to know hotels and inns will be on the lookout for wanted criminals. They can’t exactly bring an unconscious and bound girl anywhere like

that.”

Yes, until the Werewolf regained their cool, the odds were good they would be hiding somewhere within our reach.

They could not skip town and they could not secure a proper hideout, so they would be stuck in the middle, waiting to see what happened. They might be in an abandoned building, a park, a parking garage, below a bridge, or in a forest. So right now, we could catch up to them, capture them, and take back Erika. Surely we could!!

The elevator arrived on the first floor.

The multi-purpose building had exits in the four cardinal directions, an emergency exit that doubled as a staff entrance, and the underground parking garage which we had used before. Which one had the Werewolf used to take my unconscious sister out of the building?

“Maxwell, there’s no sign of a commotion outside, right?”

“Sure. Based on social media and local community message boards, there are no reports of a large furry individual carrying an unconscious girl.”

“So they weren’t that stupid. Then they must have used the parking garage. The standard plan would be to steal a car and stuff Erika in the trunk.”

A car would give them mobility and a roof to keep out the rain and wind if they chose to use it for shelter. It was a crucial item for someone who could not use a hotel or inn, but I felt like it would also increase the fear of a checkpoint. The Werewolf couldn’t leave the city as long as they assumed a large organization was after them.

I walked down the stairs to the underground parking garage with my smartphone in one hand.

“Maxwell, pull up the footage from when I arrived with Fly and compare it to the current scene. There should be a car missing. But Erika and the others checked to make sure no one else was here before the meeting, so only the Werewolf would have moved a car.”

“Sure. A red coupe is missing.”

“A two seater? That’s pretty small if they were going to sleep in it. Maybe they plan to change cars somewhere. Use the past footage to get the license plate and determine the car’s route using its navigation system, drive recorder, or the license scanning systems installed on the roads.”

“You want me to break through the National Police Agency’s firewall when we are short on time? There appears to be an underground civilian app that lets you scan a license plate and view data on who it is registered to. It is a variation on social media facial recognition. We can make use of its users here.”

“If they’re using a wireless internet service, they’ll be sending out their wi-fi key data while they drive. Track that too.”

With two or three different sources, we wouldn’t end up heading down the wrong path.

Now, where was the Werewolf hiding in fear with Erika?

“I have found it. It is part of the plains district scheduled for residential redevelopment. Simply put, it is a long-abandoned factory.”

“Oh, that’s pretty close to that bridge,” said Ayumi. “Y’know, the one where you had that secret base way back when, Onii-chan.”

“I guess everyone ends up in the same place when they have nowhere else to go. Even that Elf girl was trying to live there when she was suffering from the abuse created by the TV station.”

...And Erika and Ayumi had ended up huddled together below that bridge after escaping from the Bright Cross.

I knew my way around that area, so there was nothing to fear. It was my home ground.

“It would be a pain if they found a new means of transportation while we aren’t looking, so let’s go settle this.”

## Part 2

The factory in question had not created anything dangerous. I was pretty sure it was canned drinks or something like that. Also, it had gone out of business and all the crucial equipment had been removed by the time I found it as a little kid, so I only saw it as a huge empty building.

The bridge in question was technically a private road on the factory's grounds. The size of the abandoned factory had seemed intimidating to the neighborhood kids and me, so we had dragged some abandoned materials out and built a more compact secret base below the nearby bridge. It was something like how you would sit at the very edge of the seats on an empty train.

I didn't use my collapsible bicycle today. After walking there with my little sister, I did indeed find something intruding on the familiar scene.

"Fugu. Is that it, Onii-chan?"

"A red coupe. That shiny waxed car really stands out here."

We found a parked sports car with the same garish coloration as a pair of high heels. I peered in the window, but there was no one inside. But when I placed a hand on the hood, it was still warm and I detected a faint scent of exhaust. I got the impression they had only just arrived. We had made our way directly here, but the Werewolf would have arrived after wandering all over the place.

"Okay, that's that confirmed."

"Huh?" asked Ayumi. "We're leaving? But I thought we were short on time."

"We only have one shot at this and a family member's life is hanging in the balance. I'm not going to do this on the fly."

I wanted to send out a drone, but if they had good night vision, that might just provoke them. Those flying toys were convenient, but there was nowhere



to hide in their low-altitude territory. For now, I stuck to disabling their car. And that didn't even require popping the hood and messing with the battery or fuses. I just had to shove some dirt or grass in from below.

You even heard about stray cats getting in from time to time.

"Maxwell, frankly speaking, which is stronger: a Zombie or a Werewolf?"

"It would depend on the situation, but a single Zombie does not seem to have much of a physical advantage. Those Archenemies truly shine as a swarm."

"Fuguu!"

Ayumi puffed out her cheeks, but we were up against someone who, whether by surprise or not, had knocked out and carried away Erika. It would be best not to underestimate them.

"As you would expect, a Werewolf is an Archenemy that incorporates a broad interpretation of a wolf's abilities into the human body," explained Maxwell.

"So in addition to excellent night vision and hearing, you also need to be cautious of their sense of smell. Even normal dogs and wolves far surpass humans on that front and we cannot predict how far that has been enhanced in the Archenemy's abilities."

"Uuh, I'm not going to give you away because I smell weird, am I?"

Really? Ayumi's pain-in-the-ass Zombie complex has to rear its ugly head here!? It's okay! You only have the sweet scent of a girl! Sniff sniff!! Have I ever looked unhappy when I smelled you!? Sniff sniff sniff!!

Anyway.

"We might be able to use that to our advantage."

"Please provide a specific method," requested Maxwell.

"Night-vision goggles amplify light, but you can't use a camera flash to blind someone using a pair. However, that's because the range of amplification is predetermined and it's programmed to cut off anything too bright."

"Fugu? Oh, I think I get it!"

"Of course, our physical senses have no programmed safeties. There are

insane peppers that are hundreds of times spicier than red chili peppers. Variety shows love using them, but what would our super-smelling Werewolf think of them?"

## Part 3

Convenience stores were everywhere these days and their shelves were lined with spices an Eastern European noble would have never seen before.

So I made a quick search with a smartphone map app and made use of a late-night oasis hidden in the residential area near the abandoned factory.

“What is this, Onii-chan? Wasabi paste???”

“Sounds like a joke, right? But even if a foreigner can handle yellow mustard, one lick of this packs enough of a punch to send tears streaming from their eyes.”

The stinging in your nose was quite unique, so even someone used to Western mustards or spicy Chinese, Korean, and Indian foods tended to have trouble with it. Even if the numerical spiciness value wasn't that high, they wouldn't have had many chances to grow accustomed to the sensation.

It could be hard to imagine for us Japanese people who grew up with wasabi, but it might be easiest to think of it like the Japanese pepper used to spice eel.

I also wanted a spray container, so I grabbed some window cleaner. I wanted a can of compressed air to increase the internal pressure, but they didn't carry those at the convenience store. I was a little afraid of starting a fire, but I bought a can of hairspray instead.

The ten or twenty thousand yen for a can of pepper spray was mostly about the brand name. You could make your own with the products at a 100-yen store and it could easily spray 5 meters. That range was more like a spear or man catcher than a projectile.

That said, it was really hard to make it safe enough to ensure you didn't harm the target's eyes, so I wouldn't recommend trying it at home. After all, eye damage would last a lifetime and harming someone with a joke product like this

could have you paying damages for years and years.

After preparing two sets, I gave one of them to Ayumi. And then...

“Here, Ayumi. Take this too.”

“Hm? Anti-pollen glasses?”

“Make sure you wear those if you don’t want to be hit by your own spray.”

Your average swim goggles had enough of a gap to let it through, but you could buy disposable glasses and masks airtight enough for use in labs. This country really was wealthy.

“And don’t rub your eyes with your wet hands. That would defeat the purpose of the glasses.”

“Fuguu. I’m not stupid.”

“It might sound silly, but it’s as common an accident as zapping yourself with your own stun gun.”

“I said I’m not stupid! Hmph!!”

...We were up against a Werewolf who we knew had greater specs than us, so there was no telling how much a single mistake would hurt us. I was just legitimately worried about my little sister, but it seemed I had hurt her pride. I may have entered the same downward spiral as when my mom asked if I had done my homework.

Once our preparations were complete, we returned to the dark abandoned factory.

The red coupe was still there.

There were three or four large buildings, a few storehouses, and a backup power facility on either side of the river. They were all as large as a school building. We didn’t know where the Werewolf was hiding, so we couldn’t afford to let our focus slip.

“Let’s start by checking the building closest to the red coupe.”

“Okay.”

Before entering the building, we put on the anti-pollen glasses to make sure

we could use our spray at any time.

Despite being an abandoned factory, mysterious metal machinery was not set up everywhere like a jungle gym. The liquid storage tanks, injectors, and conveyer belts had all been removed, so it was just a wide open space like a gym. Some of the wall and ceiling panels had fallen away and created piles taller than we were, so we had to check behind there. Also, there were a few smaller rooms in addition to the main factory floor – probably bathrooms, a break room, locker rooms, a security room, and so on. They were similar to the storeroom and broadcast room at the walls of a gym.

I wanted to avoid using lights if at all possible, but feeling around blindly would also just be asking to be killed. After all, a Werewolf could see in the dark. I hated doing it, but I had to rely on the backlight.

“Ayumi, since we have the inferior specs for once, we have no hope if we don’t get in the first move. Even if you don’t see them, start spraying if things look suspicious.”

“Fugu?”

“It’s best if you hit them in the face, of course, but it isn’t strictly necessary. The aerosolized wasabi will hang in the air for a bit, so that should have an effect on the Werewolf’s overly sensitive...”

I heard a dull sound like a metal bat swinging through the air.

“...eyes and nose. Dammit!!”

Before even turning around, I aimed the sprayer toward the sound and pulled the trigger. With assistance from the hairspray gas, it sprayed out like a water gun with a 5m range. I had no way of knowing if it had actually hit, but the primary component of wasabi would have been scattered around by our homemade pepper spray.

They knocked me down regardless.

Was that...a right arm!?

The one hit turned the world red before my eyes and my vision tilted so far to the side that I thought my entire head had been taken off. It actually scared me

that I didn't feel any pain. I was apparently spinning through the air and I finally slammed into the concrete floor.

Those killed by a Werewolf became one.

If that was true, I should be fine as long as it wasn't a deep enough wound to tear through my body and kill me instantly.

I heard an odd rumbling that may have been the Werewolf's roar. It sounded more like an animal in pain than a threat. I had been left with something thick dripping out of the ear pressed against the floor, but the attack may have been slowed somewhat by the pepper spray.

"Onii-...!?"

"...!"

And even if I was on the verge of death, this was no time to act like someone who wanted to be pampered while they had a cold.

Ayumi was here. So was Erika. So if I was going to die, I could do it later. Eliminating the threat of the Werewolf came first!!

"Ahhh!!"

I could barely gather any strength after being knocked down, but I still managed to move the hand holding the modified spray bottle. I couldn't hope to hit a Werewolf running through the darkness, but they had only fought close-range with their fangs or claws.

So I had to change targets and spray it at Ayumi.

It wouldn't damage her thanks to the anti-pollen glasses, but the wasabi components would spread around her to create a spherical barrier.

In other words...

No matter how the Werewolf tried to approach her, the aerosolized substance would reach their nose. And they were an Archenemy whose nose would be even more sensitive than a normal dog's or wolf's.

Something exploded in the darkness.

No, it may have been the Werewolf's scream.

“A...yumi. Stay where you are!!”

My cowering little sister still didn't know what was happening, but when I shouted from behind her, we both aimed our modified sprayers at the shadow lurking in the darkness.

This time, we aimed directly for the face.

But the silhouette moved away from us and our cheap water gun trump card accomplished nothing. No, they were getting away. Had they recovered from their confusion and figured out what our secret weapon was!?

I heard a series of banging sounds.

When I aimed my smartphone's backlight in that direction, I saw the wall broken open near the exit. They had smashed their way out near the rectangular hole for a door.

“...So we did rob them of their senses.”

“Wait, Onii-chan! That red...are you bleeding!?”

“I took some damage, but we can't stop now. We have to get Erika back...”

I moved my unsteady legs to pursue the Werewolf while spraying the pepper spray around us.

Did they think they would have the advantage if they took their time? Pepper spray still has some effect without a direct hit. And with their sensitive senses, we could render an area off limits for them.

...And if they fled this building, then Erika had to be in another one.

“Maxwell, I'll film the ground, so check for tracks. We'll track the Werewolf.”

“Sure.”

The area was surrounded by grassy fields and there was a thin layer of dried mud on the asphalt since no one had been here in so long. Since Werewolves couldn't fly, we could use existing methods of tracking animals.

“Based on the footprints and crushed grass, they appear to be headed to the remains of Can Production Plant B. However...”

“Fugu?”

“It is troubling that they have made no attempt to hide their tracks. It even looks like they rubbed their shoes against the dirty asphalt to leave footprints on it.”

“...So that’s bait,” I said.

I slowly moved my smartphone around.

The area was mostly undeveloped wilderness, but the old roadside trees must have grown too much because there were some trees with quite thick trunks. There were also power poles without power lines, phone booths with the lights out, covered bike parking, and some cheap storage sheds like you might find in someone’s yard.

“Maxwell, check for evidence of them using an elevated route.”

“Sure. Here is some mud in an unnaturally high location and I doubt it is a wasp or swallow nest.”

“Highlight it on the screen. Oh, and draw a line along the footprints to help follow their escape route.”

There it was.

It was a product storage building on a hill. Since they were luring us somewhere with a view of the entire factory grounds, it was possible the ceiling might collapse on us if we investigated it.

“Ayumi, let’s continue eliminating their options by spraying all around the building.”

“W-wait, Onii-chan. Werewolves have good noses, right? Wouldn’t it be bad to let them know we’re coming?”

“Think about it, Ayumi. Where did they run to?”

“Well, that storage building, right?”

“To where they’re holding Erika hostage. If they’ve fled to the same building as the hostage, they’re bound to use her. They’ve crossed a line with us. When someone is afraid of being attacked and uses a hostage as a shield, you can’t sneak up on them. I am going to save Erika and I’ll push myself to the limit to do it.”



“Fugu...”

“Maxwell, check the wind direction. There’s no door, so it should be blowing inside. We can spray this stuff in there and restrict their world.”

“Sure. It is only an estimate as it is based on the geographic data and the acoustic data taken from your smartphone’s microphone, but here it is.”

After spraying the aerosolized wasabi, I heard some coughing inside, but there were no threats using the hostage.

Were their eyes and nose too badly affected, or would it have hurt their pride as an Archenemy?

After constructing that invisible minefield, we stepped inside the doorless entrance as if parting the oppressive air of that hot night. With no equipment, it was just a single large space like a gym.

“There’s no one here?”

“They’re holed up with a hostage, so they’re going to be wary of intruders. They’re going to avoid open areas with lots of entrances.”

We had already sprayed all around all the exits, so the Werewolf had no escape save breaking a wall.

Just like the other building, this one had a simple break room and bathrooms along the walls. That would be where Erika was trapped.

Now, then.

“Ayumi.”

“Yeah, leave the fighting to me.”

“Thanks, but listen. The Werewolf has a few different options here, but the most troublesome one is transforming into Erika again.”

“Fugu?”

“I was fooled by it already, so be careful. While the Werewolf can only choose to be a human or a wolf, they can create a perfect disguise in the human form. I couldn’t tell them apart from my own sister.” I glanced down at the modified sprayer in my hand. “Their sense of smell shouldn’t change even in disguise, so

we might be able to tell them apart by their reaction to this. ...But even that isn't a guarantee. They might be able to disguise their reaction just as perfectly. For one thing, we don't know the mechanism behind the transformation. If they use EM or pheromones to mess with our senses or perception, we might not be seeing what's really there. There's a possibility we would truly believe the furry macho beast in front of us is our lovely older sister."

"B-but...fuguu. How are we supposed to tell them apart then?"

"That's easy. ...No matter who it is, we spray them on sight. Once we open that door, don't trust anyone you see, not even me by your side. Once you silence everyone, you can figure out which one is the Werewolf."

"Wha-...?"

"No matter what method they're using, they can only disguise themselves into someone. They can't turn invisible or make clones of themselves. Since the number of suspects can't change, you can easily solve this by attacking every one of them."

"Fugu. Th-then you wait here, Onii-chan. There's no need to add you to the list of suspects."

"We can't create any assumed safe zones. The Werewolf could always escape the room during the fray. Have you forgotten that a Werewolf has better specs than a Zombie when it comes to pure muscular strength? It's game over if you let your guard down, approach a familiar face, and get attacked. I won't let that happen, so if we're doing this, I'm going too."

"Fuguu..."

"Ayumi. We're weaker than them and they've taken a family member hostage. You only get to choose your methods when you have the advantage, so we don't have that luxury right now."

"...Ugh, fine then."

"That's what I wanted to hear."

"But, Onii-chan, if I go too far, you can hit me in the head afterwards."

Like I could do that, you moron. Little sisters' heads are for patting. Like when

they claim they agree, but there's still a cloud over their face.

"Fuguu. Stop that. You're only making it harder for me to do this."

While listening to Ayumi complain, I glanced over to the metal door on the wall. The doors leading outside had been removed, but this one led to some office space that included a break room and bathrooms.

The two of us slowly approached.

I held up my smartphone, raised the microphone's sensitivity, and listened to the conversation occurring beyond the metal door.

"Cough, cough! You knew. You knew from the – cough! – from the beginning, didn't you!?"

"Knew what?"

I raised my index finger. I recognized one of the voices. Unless the Werewolf was playing both parts, Erika was trapped inside there.

Ayumi pointed at the hinges and then gave me a thumbs up. She seemed to be saying she could break through that.

Meanwhile, the conversation in the room continued.

"I wasn't a Vampire..."

"Well...that classification is a meaningless definition with all the legends that have been mixed by now. It's like the millibar and the hectopascal. There is no need to abase yourself."

"I only just now found out!!"

I could hear both anger and pain in that voice.

He hysterically crushed Erika's gentle argument.

"When everyone collapsed inside that multi-purpose building, I stood there with no idea what was happening. Yes, even you grew pale as you struggled to endure it, Queen. You knew it was a cheap trick like food samples made of wax, but you were still suffering! That's the proof! The proof that you are a noble Vampire... But not me! Not me! Goddammit! I believed it! I believed it all this time! Why!? Why did I have to be standing there like a goddamn fool!?"

...That was a feeling I might never understand as someone who had been born a human but still accepted a Vampire and Zombie as family.

I would never know what it was like to have your very species denied.

I would never know the shock of discovering that everyone else had been considerate enough to treat you like you were also one of the chosen elite.

I may not have meant any harm.

But my actions had still revealed Erika and the others' lie.

"You must have been mocking me behind my back..."

"Meslayate, I swear to you that isn't true! From the bottom of our hearts, we are proud of the time we spent with you. Accepting you Werewolves was the greatest achievement of the 13 Eastern European Families!!"

"You all shared that secret knowing you were better than me and you laughed at me!! You laughed at me!! You accepted me out of pity and didn't tell me the truth because you felt sorry for me!!"

"You are an ugly duckling. Unlike the rest of us, you had no reason whatsoever to hold back! We didn't tell you the truth because we were afraid. Afraid you would learn of your true stage, turn your back on our tiny gathering, and rise to much greater heights!! Yes, yes! That was all it was..."

Erika must not have realized it.

She had shown kindness.

Truly faultless kindness.

But that did not always soothe someone's heart. The more she lifted him up as someone weak, the more she shredded his pride as a noble Vampire.

As a complex teenage boy, I kind of understood the contradictory spiral the Werewolf found himself in. Although he would only resent it if someone from outside his community claimed to understand. Still, I understood.

What he wanted now was not justice or kindness.

It was nothing that smart. He wanted to throw all his power out there and – win or lose – determine his own strength. Whether he was right or wrong, he

wanted to get rid of all the unresolved feelings inside his chest. So he was left unsatisfied when Erika would not even climb into the ring and unconditionally forfeited the match out of justice and kindness. No matter what answer he got and no matter how much she gave him what he wanted, it would not satisfy him.

That wasn't it.

This wasn't the time for mercy and wisdom.

He wanted someone to accompany him in his idiocy until he was satisfied. He wanted to fill everything with complete and utter stupidity. But instead, one of the most important people he knew had smartly and cleverly dodged the issue leaving that "Vampire" alone in the ring and unsure what to do.

I understood.

I understood it painfully well.

I had been the same when my new family had first arrived. Everyone had given me everything I could want, from choosing what to have for dinner to getting the first bath, but it had all felt so flimsy and not at all like a real family. I had only felt an oppressive distance there. Yes, yes! I hadn't wanted a perfect model room! Even if it was muddy, I had wanted someone to do stupid stuff with me!! All I needed was for them to prove that they would stay with me to the end and wouldn't let go of my hand partway through. That was all!!

Erika hadn't noticed.

She cared for him so much that she did not notice how cruel a dividing line she was drawing here.

He wasn't afraid of physical pain. He didn't care about the balance between power and beauty that Fly Villiers had mentioned. Even if it worked against him, he just wanted to be accepted as an equal being. That was all.

To him, this 13 Eastern European Families must have been like a true family. None of the other 13 Eastern European Families would have worked. That framework had been so important to him he was willing to put it ahead of himself.

Hey, “Vampire”.

I only just learned that your name is Meslayate. I don’t even know if your true form is a lovely noble of the night or a furry beast. I don’t have a face to match to your name and I couldn’t confidently state whether you’re part of the Traditionalist side or the Hidden Cloud side. Yet I still destroyed your life and drove you to this based on no more than a vague suspicion, so it’s entirely shameless for me to say this.

Still, I understand, so I’ll do this with you.

I’ll stick with it to the very end. I’ll keep fighting to the last second. That must be my duty for doing this to you.

From here on, there’s no such thing as cheating or playing fair.

I won’t use that as an excuse to avoid fighting with everything I’ve got. I won’t restrict any of my options. I won’t prepare any clever excuses in case I lose.

That’s what it means to go all out, right?

So out of respect for a powerful “Vampire” of the historic and stylish 13 Eastern European Families, I won’t hold anything back. Listen, I will do it. I really will. I’ll stop worrying about appearances and I’ll use every option available to me to challenge this formidable foe. So you come at me with everything you’ve got. So that neither of us has any regrets.

If I had to classify you as an enemy or an ally, you’re undoubtedly an enemy. So we’ll never get along.

But.

This I will promise you: I will rid you of all those unresolved feelings in your chest.

“Ayumi.”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s settle this.”

Now.

Let’s dance in the moonlight, “Vampire” Meslayate!!

With a loud bang, Ayumi mercilessly kicked down the metal door.

## Part 4

My sense of time had long since left me.

I don't know if it was adrenaline or endorphins, but an excessive amount of brain chemicals left my world abnormally clear and everything actually seemed to move in slow motion as Ayumi and I aimed our modified sprayers into the room.

Unlike the large and specialized factory equipment, the ordinary household items in this room were worthless, so the dirty tables, metal lockers, electric water boiler, microwave, and such had been left behind. Of course, the electronics would have no power. In that cramped and cluttered room, Erika sat in a folding chair. She wore her new type of gothic lolita dress with a crimson corset emphasizing her large breasts, her black-gloved hands were tied behind her, and a blindfold covered her eyes. Even so, she gathered all her strength in her gut and raised her voice with no concern for what it meant to her.

"Satori-kun? Wait!!"

Shut up.

Sorry, but your justice and kindness can butt out right now.

It was time to be an idiot.

Yes, a complete and utter idiot.

I was challenging a noble "Vampire" to a fight between men. Meslayate, you're the kind of scum that uses people's families as shields, but I'll still preserve your pride and dignity. I won't even let that warrior woman from heaven take issue with that!!

"!?"

"!!"



My eyes met with those of my enemy.

Time seemed to have stopped altogether as my smartphone backlight revealed a figure in the darkness. It was a large man with beautiful silver fur covering his upright body. So that was Meslayate. The voice had given it away, but I was honestly disappointed he wasn't a cute girl. Still, this wasn't bad. He had the perfect look for the enemy boss. He really wasn't the type to inspire sympathy or a protective urge. Even if he was being given more of that than he wanted. He would have looked at home seated on a throne in the demon king's castle.

I was thankful.

This made it worth risking my life here!

"I'm taking back my sister, 'Vampire'!!"

When he heard my shout, there was a slight waver in those large bestial eyes.

C'mon, it's too soon for those tear glands to loosen up. I'm not your friend. I'm here to kick the ass of a real piece of shit!!

Unfair or not, I had decided to show my respect to this most formidable of foes by using everything I had available to me. So I would use weapons and gang up on him 2-against-1. Ayumi and I both sprayed our homemade pepper spray around. Meslayate nimbly and boldly swung his body around like a pro boxer to keep it from hitting his face, but this was a cramped space. The aerosolized particles quickly filled the break room.

"Dhhhhh!?"

The beast covered his face with a hand and screamed in something other than human language. Still, his feelings got through to me. There was definite joy showing through the pain and rage.

Yes, this was what he really wanted.

Flimsy niceties were meaningless when you were risking your life, so his true desires were stripped bare here. It makes you happy, doesn't it? Yes, once you see how clear the world becomes, you'll realize how foolish it was to curl up and narrow your vision! You feel like spreading your wings and flying free once

more! Right, “Vampire” Meslayate!?

I heard the dull sound of a metal bat swinging through the air.

I didn’t have time to protect myself. It was far too late by the time I heard it.

He was fast!

My vision flew to the side. No, my body flew through the air like a scrap of paper and slammed into the wall to the right. A filthy mirror broke and my entire body was somewhat embedded in it.

“Gbh!?”

This was an Archenemy.

The true paranormal.

No matter how much I prepared, they could turn everything around with a single blow. My pain had passed the upper limit and the gauge’s needle showed no sign of returning to the normal range. I tried to gather my strength and stand up after sliding down to the floor, but I only convulsed a little. I did not have any choice here. This was what it meant for death to be approaching. I wasn’t a battery-powered toy, so I couldn’t move around like nothing was wrong just before breaking. That harsh truth became all too clear.

...Unlike in dramas and movies, real people readily died from a single stab of a knife or blow from a hammer.

But have you forgotten, Meslayate?

No matter how much of someone’s freedom you take and how many of their options you close off, the will to resist doesn’t vanish until you really and truly kill them.

I don’t have to stand up.

As long as I can move my right hand, I can still use the modified sprayer!

“...———!!!???”

I finally got a direct hit.

Right to the side of the face.

A howl void of all meaning erupted like an audio feedback loop. This wasn't about my skill. His luck had run out when he assumed he had defeated the puny human and focused on Ayumi instead.

While tormented by the intense pain ruling his senses, Meslayate swung his log-like arms around a few more times. Ayumi kept her distance and seemed to be watching for a chance to rush at him.

I pulled over an electric water boiler lying on the floor with the shards of the mirror.

Had he noticed the quiet sound even in the maelstrom of pain?

He gave a roar that only sounded like a staticky audio feedback loop to human ears and he charged toward me. Sitting up with my back against the wall had been the most I could manage, so I had no chance of rolling out of the way.

I had only one option.

I held the electric water heater, performed a simple operation, and threw it with just the strength of my right hand.

Meslayate's hand tore through the air with the force of an anti-ship weapon. He likely intended to pierce my head or heart along with the flying object.

"Onii-...!?"

Ayumi's shout did not even arrive in time.

But not everything in the world was determined by meticulous preparation. Hey, "Vampire", thermoses and electric water heaters are made to keep the water from cooling. There are two ways of doing that. One is to place a layer of air in between to prevent the heat from escaping. The other is to silver plate the interior to prevent the heat from being absorbed as infrared radiation.

Yes, silver.

The same silver mentioned in the fairy tales.

I heard a silly "boh?" of escaping air. It came from Meslayate's mouth. His right arm had plunged straight into the opened water heater pot, but that was all. The pot had not broken. In fact, it was not knocked backwards despite flying through the air with nothing to support it. Instead, Meslayate's right arm

bounced backwards as if he had punched an invisible wall.

And that wasn't the only product made with silver. If a thin layer of silver plating was enough...

“Ayumi!!”

I gave a shout, selected a shard of mirror as large and sharp as a knife, and threw it with what little strength I had left. The shard spun through the air and flew over Meslayate's shoulder. That “Vampire” turned to follow it with his eyes while he suffered from the damage to his right arm, so he had to have seen it. My little sister had already run up to him and she easily caught the weapon in her bare hand.

Mirrors were made by applying silver plating to the back of a plate of glass.

She did not hesitate.

Ayumi swung it down like a stake and mercilessly plunged it into “Vampire” Meslayate's thick chest.

# **[crucial notice] Memo to an Apprentice [on the pinup board]**

–The following is an abbreviated list of common knowledge that could affect the market value depending on the amount discovered.

- Gold: Highly prized because it symbolizes an eternal shine, but it can actually eternally fix a curse in place, leading to endless reports of an object bringing ruin to its owners.
- Silver: Effective in warding off evil. Highly prized for active uses more than passive ones. Simply put, better suited for weapons than shields. Changes color in response to certain poisons, so it is also favored for use in dishware.
- Copper: Does not carry much protective meaning on its own, but it can change the nature of various objects such as with bronze or shakudo. Functions as a connector to assist the bonds between different substances.
- Iron: This might seem surprising, but it wards off evil just like silver. But unlike silver, it functions as a passive talisman such as the horseshoe hanging from the front door or eaves to keep fairies away. Good for armor. If you need to give an object more offensive meaning, silver is preferred.
- Lead: As should be obvious from the fact that silver bullets are a thing, it has little occult meaning. And if you are wondering why gold bullets, copper bullets, and iron bullets don't sound as impressive, you should learn more about the traits of metals.

# Chapter 6

## Part 1

Finally.

At long last, the extreme tension of imminent death had relaxed.

“Ayumi...”

“Don’t worry. I just barely missed his heart and silver works as a disinfectant. The wound’s tissue has returned to normal, but the muscle around it is many times stronger than a human’s. Tense up and you could tear yourself open. And don’t forget that transforming now could take your life. We’ll have a black market doctor or someone remove the affected tissue later.”

Partway through, Ayumi started speaking to Meslayate who was curled up and grimacing.

“No, not that. Although I am grateful you could avoid killing him. But you promised in the beginning you would punch out everyone here, including me and Erika. That way you wouldn’t have to worry about his transformation tricking you.”

“Hmph.”

My little sister gave a snort and tapped her small fist against the top of my head with the same force as a gentle pat.

“...Wait, Ayumi...”

“What, you want to keep going?”

Dammit. I wanted to lecture her, but my body refused to move properly.

I still hadn't gotten over what that Werewolf had done to me. In fact, it might take more than a few days to do that. It felt a lot like being hit by a small car. So while leaning against the wall, I pointed my trembling finger toward blindfolded and bound Erika.

"Okay, then. Ayumi, take care of Erika. Just save her already."

"To be clear, you've taken more damage than anyone else here, Onii-chan! Fuguu. Even more than the Werewolf!!"

The way my Zombie little sister would complain but still obey my instructions was one of her best points if you ask me. She had mastered taking action before even thinking.

And once she was saved, my older sister immediately stopped acting the damsel in distress.

In fact, she was angry.

What was that Fly had said about a balance between power and beauty? All I could see was fear!

"Satori-kun. I am partially to blame since I was captured, but I get the feeling you will permanently lose your way if I hold back here, so I am prepared to throw out my shame. I am going to tell you something very important, so listen carefully."

She bent over to move her face in close and looked me in the eye from extreme close range.

"Eri-..."

"Listen."

I didn't dare look away.

I had to wonder if Meslayate had blindfolded her to block the overwhelming pressure of her ruler's eyes.

And Amatsu Erika said the following:

"If you ever do anything that causes you to lose your life for no good reason, I – and probably Ayumi-chan as well – will not hesitate to bite you."

“...”

Even if that was a hypothetical scenario, her statement held great meaning.

“Also, we will fight every last person who attempts to judge that twisted form of peace and we will grasp victory even if it means covering the planet with the undead. That is how important the Amatsu family is to us as a place we can finally relax in. There are ways to wipe out the human race aside from the Calamity. Never forget that.”

“Fuguu.”

Ayumi cut in from the side.

I hoped she would take my side here, but she was just as exasperated.

“To be blunt, Onii-chan, if we lost you, we’d probably be so overcome by rage that we couldn’t stop ourselves. We were working against each other in that simulation, but what do you think would happen if we work together to spread our infections in a calculated fashion? The Bright Cross’s methods were despicable, but there was a reason they felt the need to go that far.”

She didn’t seem to be joking.

When they saw I couldn’t nod or shake my head, they seemed oddly accepting of it. In fact, I had a feeling they would have hit me if I had readily agreed or disagreed.

“Anyway, Onee-chan.”

“What is it, Ayumi-chan?”

“So which side was that Meslayate on? The Traditionalist side or the Hidden Cloud side?”

When Ayumi changed the subject, Erika brushed back the hair falling over her cheek.

“Is there any doubt? Given how much he built his identity on being a ‘real’ member, do you really think he would work to undermine our group?”

...She had a point.

I had initially suspected him since he was the only Werewolf, but Meslayate’s



pride in the 13 Eastern European Families was real. And not just any 13 Eastern European Families would do. He loved the one he shared with Erika and the others. There would have been no room for the Hidden Cloud's temptation to reach him. If their scout or agent had approached him with a grin, he would have hit them right in the vitals.

"Fuguu. Then this was all a waste. Although it's good you're safe, Onee-chan."

"Don't be silly," I said. "This was 4-to-8 Russian roulette and even that Fly was an enemy, but we finally found an ally we can open up to and rely on. We couldn't hope for anything better than that."

Meslayate seemed the most surprised by what I said, but that was none of my concern.

A crime was a crime and it might require a punishment, but Meslayate's crime had only happened because we had carelessly cornered him along with everyone else in that multi-purpose building. Plus, he had so much pride in and love for the 13 Eastern European Families that he was willing to go this far over it.

When all the Vampires had collapsed in that multi-purpose building, Meslayate could have delivered a finishing blow while they were defenseless. There had been at least 4 in that conference room. But he hadn't done that. If he held a grudge or had betrayed them, it would not have turned out this way.

...I felt I could smile and forgive his crime.

In fact, now that everything had settled down, I felt like we were the ones that should bow down in apology.

Of course, this was all predicated on the fact that Erika was unharmed. There was no reason to push away happiness here.

## Part 2

We had settled things with Meslayate, but that wasn't everything. We still needed to deal with the Hidden Cloud group inside the 13 Eastern European Families.

"I guess it makes sense to leave that to Karen back in the multi-purpose building. Maxwell, call all of the building's internal numbers. Karen's bound to answer one of them."

"Sure."

It took 5 rings before she picked up. It seemed that god was confident in her position there.

"Hello, hello. This is Karen-chan. You're disguising where this call is from, aren't you?"

"We've dealt with things here. Meslayate is clean. What about you? Found anything on that Hidden Cloud that wants to kill the gods?"

"Let's just say I have my suspicions. Like I said, I want the help of someone good with data and computers so I can attack the Hidden Cloud. I more or less know what needs to be done, so come on back to the...what was this building called? The Starlight Kukyou?"

...To be honest, I only cared about removing this corruption from the 13 Eastern European Families, so I didn't need to get involved beyond that. Unfortunately, Karen refused to tell me who was on the Hidden Cloud side. She was probably doing it on purpose to negotiate with me.

It was a pain, but I had no choice.

"Understood."

"Yes, yes. Please get back ASAP."

She hung up.

Ayumi and Erika exchanged a glance too.

“What will you do, Onee-chan? Fuguu, it’s already 3 AM, so if this drags on, the sun could come out and you wouldn’t be able to return home.”

“The same is true for all of the 13 Eastern European Families, so it’s no excuse for me alone to sit this one out. Don’t worry. I can use the network of tunnels below the city to get home if I have to.”

...She said that, but Erika was so bad with machines that she would come crying to me in nothing but a negligee because she was having trouble hooking a normal DVR up to her TV, so I doubted she could open the electronic locks on those thick doors. I had to add that as a priority line on my to-do list.

“Meslayate, you’re a different matter. I don’t know if you’re staying at a hotel, an inn, or renting out someone’s room, but you need to get back there for today.”

He gave me a look of surprise and even more displeasure, but I was not going to budge on this one.

“We can’t take you into a fight when you have that silver wound. You can take a logistical support role until we can deal with that injury, okay?”

He gave a deep growl that was clearly not human language. He was not happy, but he seemed to give in for the time being. Based on the movements of his ears and tail, I doubted he was going to argue the point right now.

...The truth was I did not fully trust Karen. I had finally found a trump card I could rely on, so I wanted to preserve Meslayate for now.

In her long skirt with the wide open front, skintight black leather pants, and crimson corset that accentuated her large breasts, Erika covered her mouth with a black-gloved hand and giggled.

“My, my. Meslayate, you certainly have taken a liking to Satori-kun.”

“Eh? What do you mean, Erika?”

“That proud ‘Vampire’ never obeys someone else’s oral commands. Not even I could get him to back off with a verbal promise without a test of courage to

prove I was worthy of trust.”

“???”

It didn’t feel real even after she explained it, but was she saying he would listen to me?

Still, I wanted a source of information on the 13 Eastern European Families. It felt weird, but I exchanged email addresses with that long-lived nobleman of the night.

My beautiful sisters and I parted ways with injured Meslayate and left the building.

Like Ayumi had said, we did not have much time with dawn approaching. After looking around the abandoned factory’s grounds, we found an old bicycle that had been sitting there for who knows how long.

That introduced a slight problem.

“Fuguu. Onii-chan only found one bike.”

“So it seems.”

“But there’s three of us and only two people can ride it at once.”

“That is about the size of it.”

I could have sworn some invisible sparks were flying.

“Fuguu! Onee-chan, you just have to transform into a bat or wolf and elegantly follow us!”

“My, my. Shouldn’t you give that spot to me since I was just being held hostage?”

“Vampires have 20 times human strength and Zombies only have 10 times, so I’m weaker!”

“Show off your skills as a runner girl. And if someone is going to sit behind him, I’m sure Satori-kun would prefer someone with big boobs.”

“Fuguu, fuguu! I’m lighter and more compact. Pedaling uphill with heavy old Onee-chan weighing you down would be hell, Onii-chan!!”

“...Ayumi-chan, how about we take this out back?”

“Oh, c’mon, Onee-chan! Your boobs aren’t the only thing that’s big! Like your butt!”

“Wait, you...!! I-I-I warned you, little sister!!”

I didn’t know what they were fighting about, but when an argument showed no sign of ending, settling it with rock-paper-scissors was the Japanese way.

“Rock paper scissors!!”

“Rock paper scissors!!”

“Rock paper scissors!!”

And so the squeaking of the bicycle pedals echoed through the late-night residential district.

“Pant, pant. Why do I have to run a marathon when I was the one that found the bike?” I asked. “I’m the intelligent and clever type, so I’m not cut out for this kind of physical exertion.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“And you two! Don’t look so glum after stealing the bike I found and taking the easy way out! Why do you look like this wasn’t what you wanted!?”

The scenery changed as we left the residential district and approached the subway station area. At this time of night, there were not many people for how many lights there were. Old guys who had missed the train were passed out drunk here and there.

...Only now did I recall the possibility of being questioned by the police. Although Erika could get out of it by showing her Archenemy ID since Vampires could only be out at night.

We returned to the Starlight Kukyou multi-purpose building via the underground parking garage.

I didn’t know what floor Karen was on, but I started by taking the elevator to the top floor where the large conference room was.

She must have had a hard time waiting because she was standing restlessly in the hallway.

“Hiya, Satori-san.”

“...You sure seem calm. Did you finish sorting them into the Traditionalist side and Hidden Cloud side?”

“Easily. I just had to close them each in different rooms and say the first one to tell me what they know would be the winner here.”

“You monster.”

“Oh, but none of them went full-on backstabber right away! Just like with shoplifting and train molestation, it’s the wrongfully accused people who freak out the most. It’s the ones who saw the accusation coming who can keep their cool, so they’re the suspicious ones. Once you’re used to it, it’s really easy to tell them apart.”

I guess someone who has observed humans for centuries would have far more data to work from. If a normal person tried that, their prejudices and suspicions would turn it into a witch hunt.

I thought she was going to guide me to where the Hidden Cloud side was gathered, but that was not the case.

Karen opened the completely deserted large conference room.

The tables were covered with smartphones, cellphones, and tablets like the evidence gathered after a fraud group was arrested.

“Did you confiscate all this from the 13 Eastern European Families? But isn’t this way too much?”

“Of course it is.” The miniskirt armor widow (!?) sounded nonchalant. “The Hidden Cloud uses a trial period just like any group. To recruit people, they want to lure them in with favorable conditions, but they can’t have the recruits betraying them at the last second and spilling the beans to professional hunters like the Bright Cross. So the 13 Eastern European Families is still not part of the cloud. At this stage, the Hidden Cloud wouldn’t want to leave any evidence that would lead back to their core.”

Of course, there was no way to *completely* erase digital data. I've heard there are some who prefer to write encrypted text on paper for that reason.

"So the devices the Hidden Cloud contacted are physically destroyed after a certain period of time?"

"It's kind of like an even more brutal version of ransomware. The 13 Eastern European Families must have known about it because it looks like they prepared a ton of cheap mobile devices in advance."

While telling me that, Karen casually grabbed a tablet from the table and tossed it to me. It may have been nothing to her, but the notebook-sized device was kind of scary.

The screen was completely frozen.

It could not contact anywhere but the Hidden Cloud and it displayed a countdown to the physical destruction of the hardware.

It was one-time-use and waiting for the connection to be made from this end.

"The limit is about an hour... Maxwell."

"No. I doubt simply tracing the signal will lead us back to the core of the Hidden Cloud. For one thing, I cannot even predict what kind of defenses and avoidance measures they will use."

"Don't worry. I don't expect you to do everything right away."

"..."

"Hey, aren't you getting a little too advanced when you can get upset that I agreed with what you're saying?"

"The device is currently offline and I can detect no EM or IR signals. At the very least, it is not playing dead while gathering data with a camera or microphone."

"Contact our white hacker friend Anastasia. Send her a frozen version of the virus and have her analyze it. If I'm remembering right, her university lab has a modified blog analysis program that uses a database of viruses and similar programs to detect the coding habits and idiosyncrasies in a new virus and narrow down the possible creators."

“And then we wait for the answer?”

“No, I’ll let you be the star. Prepare a flowchart of conversation patterns. We’ll do a CC attack.”

Digital crimes and hacking might sound like nothing but a bunch of incomprehensible programming language, but that wasn’t the only method.

For example, you could call up a software development company’s support desk and pretend to be a customer in trouble in order to access their internal tech, like unlocking passwords or activating shared settings. That was known as a customer center attack or CC attack for short.

I was going to base this on that.

“There is a customer here: the person the Hidden Cloud recruiter wants to get on their side. But I’ve never spoken with them before, so I can’t do this.”

“Shall I drag out one of the corrupted 13 Eastern European Families members?” asked Karen.

“We only get one shot at this, so we can’t have them betray us and shout that it’s a trap. I would prefer someone we can trust.”

It had to be someone that the Hidden Cloud, who were willing to cause the Calamity to get back at the gods, would want on their side very badly, but it also had to be someone we had absolute trust in.

...Everyone naturally turned in the same direction.

“Eh? Me...?”

Erika was confused by everyone’s attention.

But no one was a better fit for our needs. She was an Eastern European Queen and the most important member of the 13 Families, but she was also family for Ayumi and me. She would never betray us.

“This might be a poor example, but it’s like a sting operation to catch scammers. Erika pretends to be interested on the phone to keep the recruiter there. When she doesn’t know what to say, she finds a way to avoid giving a straight answer. Maxwell and I will come up with the necessary questions and responses, so we’ll give her cue cards to read. Maxwell.”



“Sure. I will do my best to inconspicuously slip in questions related to their identity and what methods they have to prevent someone from tracing the signal. Even if tracing them would normally be impossible, that can change if one of them tells us too much. Let us use this conversation to find a foothold for tracing them.”

“O-okay. I’ll do my best...”

Erika only had to follow our instructions, but she seemed weirdly nervous and almost shy. She was normally a perfect big sister who could do anything, but maybe she was always like this on the phone.

The method of accessing the Hidden Cloud was simple. There was only one button to tap on the single-use mobile device.

“O-okay, I’ll make the call.”

“Right.”

I had Maxwell create a new file so we could construct the flowchart in real time.

Erika bit the tip of her black glove’s middle finger and pulled it off before touching the tablet’s screen with her slender, white pointer finger. Then she gently set the device down on the table. Just to be safe, she placed the removed glove over the camera lens.

Perhaps because it was not a phone, it was only capable of speaker phone. Hearing the person on the other end was easy enough, but there was also a risk of them hearing us moving. We couldn’t be optimistic.

The “processing” icon flashed for a while, but then it suddenly cut out completely.

It was finally beginning.

We had a connection to the Hidden Cloud’s recruiter.

## Part 3

A high-pitched artificial-sounding voice came from the tablet.

“Have you figured out which side it is in your best interests to join?”

Erika glanced over at me. I operated my smartphone real quick and held the small screen toward her.

*...There's no point in lying here. Tell them it's you using someone else's device.*

“Are you asking that of Elisabeth as an individual, or were you under the impression she had taken control of this entire 13 Eastern European Families?”

“...”

“If you hang up without saying a word, I will interpret that as the entire Hidden Cloud insulting the 13 Eastern European Families. Were you hoping for a war?”

The silence continued for a while, but according to Maxwell's analysis, it was fairly meaningless. We could not hear any rapid breathing or flipping through notes, so they were not actually unsure how to respond. They simply hoped to retake control of the conversation by making us impatient enough to lose our cool.

Haunted houses were scary, but the atmosphere was ruined once you spotted a staff member sneaking around in the background. This wouldn't be enough to rattle us.

Finally.

The artificial voice slowly resumed speaking.

“Who are you?”

“Someone other than Elisabeth. That is all I will say.”

“Amatsu Erika, the Eastern European Queen. Now that is a big name.”

Ayumi's eyes widened in shock and she glanced over at the dark window.

But that wasn't it.

If they were observing the building and knew Karen and I had taken out the 13 Eastern European Families, they would not have responded to the call.

So I knew exactly what to display on my screen for Erika.

*...They simply researched all the members of the 13 Eastern European Families in advance. They're just making an educated guess based on how you speak and how you referred to Elizabeth as a subordinate.*

Erika gave me a displeased wink and wagged her bare white index finger. She apparently did not like me saying she Elizabeth was a subordinate.

"However, I doubt Amatsu Erika would want to push a fellow member out of the way to contact us."

"How much do you really know about me?"

"What is your point?"

"What I want first and foremost is the survival and prosperity of the 13 Eastern European Families. I have no way of knowing if I can reach a nice clean end to this if I continue a witch hunt against an unknown number of corrupted members. If the alternative is destroying ourselves in a fruitless internal struggle, wouldn't it be better to simply change the entire organization's affiliation?"

My older sister with the crimson corset accentuating her large breasts kept glancing over at me. She was following my instructions, but she was clearly not happy about what I was having her say. The way she silently bared her fangs was really scary!

"That does not sound like your style."

"What I want is irrelevant."

Their conversation was like two locked blades.

Meanwhile, Maxwell was listing up every pattern for the possible developments and responses. I chose one from the list and held my

smartphone out toward Erika.

*...Let's get down to business.*

"Our 13 Eastern European Families has just one demand. Bring an end to the conflict you have created amongst us and we will move the entire group to the Hidden Cloud. That is the only way to prevent my precious companions from destroying each other."

"What are you asking us to do?"

I let Erika see my smartphone's screen.

"I can stay in the Amatsu household, but we cannot have the entire 13 Families live with us as a homestay. Thus, providing them a new home is the bare minimum. I would also like you to provide them with a travel route. When Vampires cross the ocean, we remain in our coffins which are shipped as cargo. Of course, that is all for nothing if hunters sniff us out."

"None of that sounds like a direct means of stopping your internal conflict."

"It is the same as the rules for a refugee camp. People will obey someone who supplies them with basic necessities. Of course, that is only for a stable source of supplies."

"I see. But the specifications are going to be rather lengthy."

"Use a Net Box."

"No. We can't use a civilian uploader."

"What about Sky Mail or a Data Bottle?"

"Disposable addresses are nice, but you cannot avoid the risk of data remaining on the third party's server."

"Then what? Should we directly exchange the data with P2P file sharing software?"

"Is anyone in your 13 Eastern European Families using a Cranberry Phone not infected with this malware? That can use an old satellite phone service that exists outside any national authorities' watchful eyes. The satellite manages the data instead of a server on the surface. Once we send the data and you receive

it, we can hack the satellite and have it burn up in the atmosphere to ensure no data remains in a third party's hands. We will monitor things and send instructions when necessary."

The call ended and the tablet went entirely silent. They may have increased the CPU's clock frequency an excessive amount. Whatever it was, I doubted it would ever run again.

Erika gave me an anxious look to ask if she had done a good job, so I gave her a thumbs up.

"Maxwell, analyze the voice! Even if the pitch was altered, they can't hide their breathing and the pauses before answering. Figure out when they were nervous or worried!"

"Sure. There were oddities at the mention of a Net Box and P2P. On the other hand, I can detect no change at the mention of Sky Mail."

"What about the final Cranberry Phone suggestion?"

"Nothing. Less than the Sky Mail."

"...Hm."

While I pondered this, Ayumi gave me a puzzled look.

"Fuguu. So what did you figure out from that?"

"I haven't completely figured anything out yet."

There was no point in lying, so I honestly reported on the situation.

"But they were clearly avoiding something. And there was a predictable reaction in how they avoided it."

"Fugu."

"Ayumi. To keep it simple, let's stick to the 5 main school subjects. If you had to choose just three of those to determine whether or not you passed an important entrance exam, which would you choose?"

"Japanese, social studies, and science. If I could be more specific, I would go with modern literature, geography, and biology. Oh, but if I could choose just the fill-in-the-blank section, I'd go with English."

...It was impressive how she went for the ones that were almost entirely memorization.

But...

“I bet our blonde big sister would choose English, math, and science. She would avoid this country’s history and classical literature. I would choose math, science, and Japanese. Chemistry and short essays if I could be more specific. ... My point is you can tell something about someone from what they’re good at and what they avoid.”

To be blunt, both Sky Mail and P2P had some risk. The fact that they had been more nervous about one than the other pointed to the Hidden Cloud technician’s area of expertise.

These days, schools taught simple app development just like they taught dance in gym, but none of the world’s textbooks would teach you how to hack or commit digital crimes. Everyone was self-taught and shared techniques within their team, so incomplete knowledge and unnecessary detours were unavoidable.

And these crimes could seem widespread since they occurred on the global internet, but it was actually a surprisingly narrow field. It was the same as a band of thieves or marriage scammers. Not everyone you met on the internet was a monster.

With computers and mobile devices spreading around the world, it was said there were more than 4 billion users, but I wanted to believe obsessives like Anastasia, who pored over every line of source code whenever the monthly OS update file came along, were rarer than hobbyists who used bazooka-like single-lens reflex cameras or amateur radios. Even I generally left everything to Maxwell.

In other words...

“If they’ve created a place for themselves with their skill in this one field, this won’t be their first crime. If we check through past cyber-attacks, we have a good chance of discovering a ‘similar anonymous individual’.”

Thinking back, their excessive fear of leaving any data on a third party server

may have been the same sensitivity as someone with a criminal history trying not to leave any fingerprints at the crime scene.

“Miss Anastasia has sent a reply. After checking the virus code against the 17,600 entries of the university’s digital crime archive, it matches the Bad Caste hacker group which has caused trouble in India.”

“A country of mathematicians with a population of more than a billion? That’s quite the melting pot.”

“Bad Caste is a team which claims to work toward the end of unjust discrimination and the elimination of wealth gathering in the privileged classes, but the estimated suspects vary from street children to industrial billionaires. They are estimated to have between 500 and 1000 members. That is the same as a small village or town, so it is not enough to identify an individual.”

“They wouldn’t all be skilled hackers. A lot of them would be DDoS zombies simply used for their machine power. The attacks would be led by a handful of elites – of heroes. Refine the search with Net Box, Sky Mail, Data Bottle, P2P, and Cranberry Phone. We can filter through these heroes using their strengths and weaknesses. That should give us the answer.”

“And there it is. Their real name is unknown, but they go by Avatar Null. That may mean an incarnation of zero or a god with no set value or contents.”

“It just means they’re intangible like a ghost so no one can catch them. Don’t read too much into a simple joke.”

For Avatar Null, was the Hidden Cloud like a second job, or had Bad Caste been nothing more than camouflage and a means of keeping busy during their downtime?

“More importantly, check through their history. We need to use the Cranberry Phone satellite service as suggested while also setting up a trap that will distract them.”

“Three years ago, Avatar Null was caught by an exchange’s software switch lock, so their hacking server system, which was hidden on a cruiser, was located and seized. You could call it a ‘you thought you had ended the call, but it didn’t end’ trap. It seems they just barely managed to avoid being identified and

arrested themselves.”

“That’s not even a mental blind spot. It’s one of the most basic things. That’s the problem with being self-taught.”

“As they say, it is darkest below the lighthouse. They also made similar silly mistakes when destroying a bank’s deposit data and attacking an attorney’s office. They seem to have escaped trouble by using a zombie PC in another country as a proxy.”

So after a painful experience, they were trying to be careful but couldn’t quite shake their bad habit.

We could use this.

“Maxwell, set up the trap with a software switch as planned.”

“This is not a guaranteed method. This was a source of trauma for Avatar Null, so they will be most wary of just such a mistake. If they notice, we will lose any chance of tracking them down.”

“I want to know for sure whether or not they’ll step on this landmine. And there’s one way of ensuring I know that.” I paused for a beat. “We don’t bury the landmine. If it’s just sitting there on the side of the road, we know for a fact they won’t step on it.”

That might sound pointless, but it wasn’t. If we set up a blatant trap that anyone would notice, Avatar Null would definitely avoid it. And that would make what they did next easier to predict. Simply put, it was like placing two grenade tripwires, one high and one low. When they tried to avoid the lower wire, they would run right into the higher one.

So...

“Wait, Queen. What is this...? I’m pausing the data transfer. There’s something I want to check!”

We were now using a Cranberry Phone and we were very much in control of the conversation.

“Hoping to negotiate a better deal at the last second?” asked Erika on my instructions. “You were the one who suggested this safe satellite route.”



“It isn’t that! Just wait! It’s to protect both of us!!”

Good, they had noticed the software switch trap.

The question was where they would step after avoiding the obvious tripwire.

...Erika did not know much about computers, so I needed to control the flow of conversation.

“Like I said before, my colleagues are in a hurry to escape. This is a small island nation with advanced communication infrastructure, so the number of cameras per square kilometer is greater than even London or New York. If we stay here too long, we cannot avoid those old-fashioned hunters.”

“...What are you asking of us?”

“How do you do, everyone? I am saying we will negotiate at a later date. For now, I am focused on getting the 13 Eastern European Families to safety. And by the way...” Erika glanced over at my smartphone. “This should go without saying, but this incident occurred while your Hidden Cloud was recruiting us. If we are sniffed out by a hunter and there are any victims, I will determine the cause and provide the appropriate punishment, so keep that in mind. I am not talking about just any 13 Eastern European Families; I mean *this* 13 Eastern European Families. In other words, if anything were to happen, responsibility would lie with you.”

I gave a thumbs up and Erika ended the call.

She elegantly placed her soft-looking bare hand on her soft-looking cheek and tilted her head.

“Are you sure that was good enough? I didn’t guide them anywhere and that sounded like a simple goodbye.”

“Don’t worry. That was perfect.”

The Hidden Cloud’s Avatar Null clearly wanted Erika’s 13 Eastern European Families quite badly. Otherwise, they would not have stayed in contact when someone could intercept the signal.

However.

We were causing trouble at the last second to force a change of venues, but if

we too obviously lured them onto a field full of traps, they would never agree to it.

Which meant...

“There won’t be another negotiation,” I said while sticking out my tongue. “Once they know their negotiation partner is just standing around after declaring them the responsible party, Avatar Null will panic. They’ll have no choice but to contact us, so they’re sure to hack into the Cranberry Phone you were using. Without any other data, they’ll have to do it no matter how afraid they are.”

“I see. In other words, being aggressive isn’t the only way to negotiate.”

“Avatar Null is an expert hacker. They wouldn’t fall for any crappy performance we put on to lure them onto a minefield. But if we dive right into that danger zone like complete amateurs, Avatar Null will have no choice but to follow us. We just have to capture them there. Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

If we knew what route the enemy would use to hack in, infecting them with a virus was easy. We just had to put a ton of viruses on the Cranberry Phone Erika was holding and wait.

“I have detected suspicious packets disguised as an app update notification. It is almost certainly Avatar Null hacking in. The 39 viruses installed on the mobile device – including Sweet Lady, Blue Blood, and Tao Long D – have activated. The counter-hacking has begun.”

“Watch out for a zombie PC proxy or an IP randomizer server.”

“How low spec do you think I am? I have located Avatar Null’s hacking machine. I am listing up the cloud space he or she is in charge of protecting. ...I have determined the full scope of the Hidden Cloud.”

“Then we don’t need them anymore. Keep the Cranberry Phone connected while contacting their local police. Don’t expect them to actually get arrested, though.”

“Sure.”

It didn't matter to me whether they were simply arrested or focused on physically fleeing. As long as they couldn't settle down and remain active online, we were free to do as we pleased.

Now, then.

"Let's find out what Avatar Null was most focused on protecting. That will be the Hidden Cloud's central management. What we do with that info will be your decision, Karen."

"Aye, sir."

"But don't you forget that you needed my help for this. If you sully my work here by doing anything as uninspired as slaughtering them all, I will find a way to punish you for it."

After driving my point home, I prepared to hand Maxwell's list to Karen.

But.

"Wait a second, Maxwell. Is this the correct result? You didn't fall for a proxy or something?"

"I simply provided the answer you requested."

"Fugu? Did you find some kind of problem? Like did you lose all the data?"

"The opposite." I gulped. "There's too much. This has 1,010,368,098 results for the 'central management'."

## Part 4

A billion results.

The entire population of the earth was around 7 billion. There was no accurate data on the number of Archenemies, but they were an overall minority. Even if you combine humans and immortals, I doubted the total would even reach 8 billion.

In other words.

“This says more than 1 in 10 people on the planet are part of the Hidden Cloud...”

When I said it aloud, the scale felt utterly absurd.

“There are 40 people in my class, so this would mean 3 or 4 of my classmates are members! Can that really be possible!?”

“Is it really that surprising?”

That unbelievable question came from Karen.

“I mean, we’re talking about the Hidden Cloud that truly wants to drive the world crazy and destroy it to strike back against the gods. If it didn’t cross national, religious, financial, and academic boundaries, it wouldn’t be a very realistic goal. They wouldn’t seem like much of an enemy.”

“But that makes them bigger than my stepmom’s Absolute Noah. How am I supposed to believe that there’s more than one organization like that out there?”

“You may be looking at this wrong.”

I wanted believe this had come as a shock.

But Erika spoke up as if trying to face the cruel reality.

“Take us Archenemies for example. We compromise our lifestyles to not

interfere with your human lives. We officially register ourselves with the government, but there's actually a lot that remains unclear. Archenemies like us are everywhere, from the schools and supermarkets to the Bright Cross and Absolute Noah. ...What if the Hidden Cloud is more like that?"

They could be human or Archenemy. They made no distinction between governments and criminal organizations.

They hated the gods.

They wanted to drag those gods down from heaven and give them the bitter taste of defeat.

...A third power had split off from the world based on nothing more than that.

So were there that many people who had been denied the normal blessings and had given up on waiting for hope? And had they actually begun taking action?

"Let's assume they can be found anywhere. Just like they were found in Absolute Noah's Echidna and our 13 Eastern European Families."

...If they had worked their way into the center of those secret organizations, it would be strange if they had not gotten into our schools and shopping centers.

Just like every country had both men and women.

Just like every religion had both adults and children.

The Hidden Cloud had already crossed all boundaries to that extent.

Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism all said the spread of evil was a sign of the end times.

The end times.

The Calamity.

The end result of an extreme moral hazard.

"But at the same time, that does not mean all of them are taking special action like the Echidna and Fly."

"What do you mean, Erika?"

“If they really do have a billion people hidden across the seven seas and the six continents including Antarctica and if all of them viewed us hostilely enough to risk their lives, everything we did would have been reported back to the Hidden Cloud. At the very least, we couldn’t have defeated the 13 Eastern European Families here in this building, right?”

“...Now that you mention it.”

“How seriously they take it differs from person to person. Not all of the registered members will be participating in real time. A lot of them may have registered and never thought about it again.”

...So that’s it.

I had been overwhelmed by the number at first, but not all of them would be on the level of a final boss. Also, even I was an atheist. But if some accidents, illnesses, and other unfortunate coincidences coincided, I might still curse the general idea of ‘god’. The Hidden Cloud was an outlet for that. A billion might sound like an incredible number, but the number of people registered with social media sites or for free email services could easily reach a billion. Even the ones that had begun as a tiny startup or a university club. And if people could be with the Hidden Cloud as well as some other group, Karen was right that it was entirely possible. Members of the police and military could create accounts with the Hidden Cloud and people could try out registering and never touch it again, so it may have been a realistic number after all.

Especially if a single person could create multiple accounts.

“But this does nothing to narrow down a target, does it?” Ayumi sounded worried. “So we have a billion suspects? This doesn’t tell us which ones are a threat. Or if there even is a core. Who are we supposed to attack to end this? It’s not like we can go around the entire world slaughtering the billion people who made those accounts.”

Blue-armored Valkyrie Karen only giggled at that. ...Knowing her, causing a planetary disaster could actually be an option. Like a deluge sans ark.

...But wait.

“You might be able to gather a billion people from social media or a search

engine, but who created this outlet? No, this would require more than just creating it. Just like OSs have monthly updates, systems require maintenance. It wasn't that Avatar Null hacker. This would require corporate manpower on the level of a powerhouse in the IT business."

"Sure," said Maxwell. "Shall we think of that as the core of the Hidden Cloud?"

"But that's easier said than done. We're talking about a server system that can support access from a billion accounts while keeping its existence entirely secret. The larger something is, the harder it is to hide. Just like the CIA has the contradictory title of the world's most famous spy organization. Something dazzling but impossible to identify no matter how hard you search sounds a lot like Cinderella's dress to me. Assuming they don't have a convenient fairy godmother, could you really find a way to do that?"

"Fuguu."

An odd sound escaped Ayumi's mouth.

No...

"...Is it really that complicated? They just need that fairy godmother, right?"

"Ayumi?"

"No, maybe getting involved with them at all was a big mistake and there was a much shorter route to the answer."

She winked.

She raised her index finger.

And my cute little sister, a Zombie with Voodoo origins, said the following.

"Everyone might have forgotten by now...but this all started with that Evil Spirit black market. If you sacrifice the person you care for most, they can give you whatever and whoever it is you want, right? Yes, no matter how ridiculous it might seem."

# **[crucial notice] Payment Confirmation [on the pinup board]**

Payment (First Half): Complete.

Security deposit confirmed.

Your payment is in order. To live up to the trust you have placed in us, we will immediately begin shipping out the requested product.

As per the contract, we will procure the equipment and deliver it to the appropriate destination. We will provide a manual, so you will need to prepare your own operation staff. The personnel for the test run will only ensure the delivered equipment is in working order. If you wish us to assemble it and provide continuing support, you will need a separate contract.

Also, you will only be delivered the bare equipment. This should go without saying, but do not forget to disguise it.

We look forward to the second half of the payment as well.

All of Evil Spirit is hoping you will find the product to be worth even more than you paid for it.

- How you dispose of this message is up to you. But if this goes public, we have measures in place to ensure it will not lead back to us.



# Chapter 7

## Part 1

The long night was finally over.

Had we gained anything from it or not?

“Fuguu. Morning”

Ayumi looked and sounded sleepy when I ran into her in the hallway. As a Vampire, Erika was probably fast asleep in the coffin below her bed.

It was like an Ouroboros, that snake biting its own tail.

I had thought we were done with that goddamn Evil Spirit already, but now it was back in the picture. And Karen was the most frustrated by this. That was hardly surprising when she might have destroyed any evidence leading back to the Hidden Cloud when she eliminated that organization herself.

The actual total was unknown, but the enormous secret server system had more than a billion accounts that went unmonitored by anyone in the world. Whether the system was maintained by an individual or a group, that had to be the actual core. The key to all the answers was the Evil Spirit which had already been destroyed.

“So all we did was waste a bunch of time.”

But it was too late now.

It was the same feeling as sitting down hard while forgetting I had an ultra-thin smartphone in my back pocket.

I was muttering to myself while preparing for school. With nothing else to do,

I was back to my usual routine.

...Normally, it would be best not to get involved. To be honest, Karen was so unsure of herself that I couldn't rely on her. I wasn't afraid of an attack from the Hidden Cloud. No, I was more afraid of that drifting Valkyrie giving up on everything and beginning a bloodbath of a witch hunt based on false accusations.

"Good morning, Satori-kun."

"Class Rep."

I ran into my forehead glasses childhood friend as soon as I stepped out the door. Her entire soul had been ripped from her body due to those rotten girls and Evil Spirit, but she seemed fine now.

"Ugh. I was out of school for a while, so I hope I won't feel left behind in class."

"You weren't out that long. The flu keeps people home for just as long all the time."

"Only because you recklessly rushed out there, Satori-kun."

But that was why her unexplained and untreatable coma had not been picked up by the TV or online news. Missing school for that long wasn't enough to gather attention.

...But as forgiving as the world could be, the car chase caused by Karen and me had made some headlines. It was pure luck that my appearance and name had not ended up in the news.

Needless to say, I couldn't approach the core of Evil Spirit by checking those trucks again. Same for the zoo they had left. For one thing, Karen was the one who had found that information, so she would have already reinvestigated it and hit a dead end when it didn't turn anything up.

But the Class Rep said something unexpected.

"Bleh, my arms and legs still feel funny. It's like when someone dislocates a joint and it gets dislocated more easily afterwards. When I tense up in a weird way, I feel like my ghost or spirit is going to leave my body..."

“I don’t know what to tell you there. What does it feel like to be just a soul?”

“I can’t really say since my memories are pretty hazy. They must really be stored in the head or brain instead of ‘the heart’ or anything vague like that. But there are bits and pieces that feel like the tip of an iceberg, so it’s very disorienting. Kind of like a half-remembered dream that just won’t leave you.”

“Well, it isn’t that you’re losing the distinction between dreams and reality. You’re simply remembering the very real things that happened when you were just a soul, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“This is nothing like that... It’s sticking with me way more than it should and these incomprehensible phrases in a foreign language are filling my mind. Can I really focus on my studies like this?”

“...What?”

“Eh? W-wait, don’t look so worried. It’s not like I have a bad headache with it or anything.”

“Sorry, it’s not that I’m not worried about you, but that’s not what I was asking about. ...What’s this about a foreign language?”

“I don’t know what language it is. Just that it isn’t Japanese.”

...But the Class Rep had had no trouble communicating when we went to Las Vegas, so she had to know a practical level of conversational English. That ruled out English too.

Come to think of it, hadn’t I been attacked by a foreigner when I was checking the backs of those armored trucks?

Yes.

That’s right.

“After corrupting that zoo, Evil Spirit was hiding their products in the blocks of meat for rare carnivores. That way they could gather products from around the world without arousing suspicion...”

I had misjudged it.

It had not begun in the zoo. That was only a safe midway shipping center.

There was a different starting point: outside the country.

We were talking about an international company that spread far beyond this small sheltered island nation.

And if worldwide black market goods and payments were being gathered at the zoo, where would it all have to pass through?

That was obvious on an island nation surrounded by ocean.

“The harbor? Part of Evil Spirit might have escaped Karen’s destruction there!”

## Part 2

...But I should have considered the time and place when I dramatically shouted the answer.

“Satori-kun, what did I just say about you recklessly rushing places? Come here. We’re both going to school! Got that!?”

“Kh, I had always dreamed of having my childhood friend drag me to school by the ear, but I never expected it to happen!”

The smartphone in my pants pocket was vibrating as a warning, but I ignored it. Don’t say anything, Maxwell. I know you’re only trying to sabotage me here!

...And to be honest, I didn’t actually have to visit that dangerous place myself. Once in the classroom, I could pull out my smartphone at my desk and tell Karen to check the harbor.

But this was Maxwell’s response:

“No. I do not recall you exchanging addresses with Valkyrie Karen. You also do not know where she is staying, so we cannot find the landline number either.”

“...This is the problem with gods who just pop up whenever they want.”

I began to wonder how we had stayed in contact so smoothly until now. Thinking back, she had just showed up most of the time, hadn’t she?

She would not answer people’s prayers and would descend to provide a divine revelation at her own convenience. How much of a selfish wife was she?

This was a real problem.

I had no way of knowing how long the Evil Spirit group working at the harbor would remain in the city. In fact, they would want to leave as soon as possible to go into hiding. They would be waiting for the first chance to flee the country. It was possible I didn’t have time to wait until night when my Zombie little sister

and Vampire older sister could attack.

I had no choice.

I took action before morning homeroom started.

...Oh, I really hate how accustomed I am to doing things behind the Class Rep's back.

"What are you up to now, Senpai?"

"Wah!?"

I had slipped out of the classroom, but a quiet girl's voice stopped me near the building entrance.

This small animal type was far more petite than the Forehead Glasses Class Rep. She had shoulder-length wavy blonde hair and white skin. It was my cute underclassman Itou Helen.

"Don't scare me like that... Wait, did I say that out loud?"

"No. But I could see Maxwell's text on your phone's screen."

"You were spying on me, you perv?"

"Per-...!?"

And unfortunately, I didn't need a secretly-lewd little girl right now. I mean, it would be nice to have a Circe Witch whose potions could give herself and others the traits of plants and animals, but that didn't mean I could drag her into danger whenever I wanted.

"Senpai, are you getting into trouble again?"

"Get out while you still can, little girl. You're not a delinquent like me, so you need to stay in school until classes are over. And you even have something like a volunteer bodyguard unit, so there'd be trouble if people found out you were involved in this."

"..."

"See ya later," I said to smoothly avoid whatever she was going to say next while I threw on my sneakers and left school. I didn't have any time to spare. I didn't even know if Evil Spirit's smuggling group was still at the harbor and

hanging around school increased the risk of being found by the Class Rep.

But as soon as I left the school gate, my smartphone vibrated in my pocket, so I checked the screen.

“Warning: Based on analysis of the nearby security camera footage, Itou Helen is tailing you at a distance of about 30-40 meters. What should I do?”

“Are you kidding me? Why is she following me?”

“You mean you were not intentionally tempting her to come?”

“How could anyone see it that way? And even if I was acting a little suspiciously, I can’t think of a single reason why she would skip school to follow me into danger.”

“Letting her hear that would likely only fill her with hatred.”

At any rate, I couldn’t ignore this, so I turned a random corner and stopped to wait. The plan was to shout “boo!” and scare that small animal girl when she poked her head around the corner. However...

“She’s still not here... That’s odd. You said she was only 30-40 meters behind me, right?”

“Warning.”

Just as Maxwell’s text reached me, something fell from directly above.

“Boo.”

“Wagh!! Wait, what!? Above me!?”

My cute underclassman was clinging upside-down to the building wall. I don’t know if it was a frog or a newt, but she must have given herself the traits of some animal or another! And did she not care she was wearing a skirt while flipped upside-down!?

My heart was pounding in my chest as Itou Helen hopped down in front of me.

“Senpai, I don’t know what you’re up to, but even I can tell you’re full of openings. I don’t want to think about how quickly you would end up dead.”

“Ugh... When did my cute underclassman learn to put so much force behind

her words?”

“Girls grow up fast. Now, I don’t want to get in your way, so please show me where to go. Having an Archenemy helping you can’t hurt, can it?”

“Yeah, but this is legitimately dangerous. I can’t just bring a girl there and I sure as hell don’t want to deal with your unofficial-but-still-ultra-scary bodyguards after the fact...”

Before I could react, my slender underclassman suddenly hugged me and snapped a selfie with her smartphone.

...

Huh?

Oh, crap. I shouldn’t have left that happen. Looking at the photo now, she’s stretching up with her eyes closed and her chin raised, so it looks a lot like she’s asking for a kiss. And why does it look like my hands is reaching for that innocent underclassman’s little butt!? I-I swear, she’s turned faked evidence into an art form here. I’m screwed if those unofficial bodyguards see this!

“Now are you more in the mood, Senpai?”

...I think this underclassman got the wrong lesson out of the whole Colosseum thing.



## Part 3

A harbor full of criminals might sound like a strange, foreign world, but not so for me. After all, I stored Maxwell in the container yard there.

The guards and workers knew me, so I didn't have to worry about being thrown out.

That allowed me to bring Itou Helen with me to that safe zone.

"Now, the harbor is a big place. If Evil Spirit has corrupted it, where would they be?"

I knew they were not in the container yard. I would have noticed something before now if they were.

"Wouldn't a section neither of us has analyzed be the most suspicious?" asked Maxwell.

"Is there anything like that left? You investigate everything whether I tell you to or not, don't you?"

"Sure. Everything from the harbor facilities to the employees."

Why was a program merely hinting at the answer?

"I recognize this self-important way of not answering questions. Did the simulator learn by watching you, Senpai?"

"...Now I'm worried about you too, Itou-san."

"Simply put, there are a few offices that are located within the harbor but are not technically affiliated with it," explained Maxwell. "For example, an ocean pollution inspection office run by an environmental protection group. It is an NPO with no financial ties to the harbor and that exists outside the harbor's chain of command, so searching the servers on the harbor management intranet turned up nothing and I overlooked them."

In other words, a “powerful weakling”. They were making full use of the idea that the pen is mightier than the sword.

And Evil Spirit had used that to create a smuggling base. They probably created an atmosphere as prickly as a hedgehog and refused to even respond to fire inspections.

“Knowing what our target is speeds this up.”

We didn’t know how many human and Archenemy forces Evil Spirit had available, so I couldn’t let my guard down even with a Circe Witch at my disposal. If they had foreseen skirmishes with other organizations over use of the harbor, they would have strengthened themselves a fair amount.

I wanted to hurry since they could escape at any moment, but I also wanted to avoid as much risk as possible. That meant I needed information.

“Maxwell, can you hack into that office’s computers? Or do you need Anastasia’s help for that?”

“No. I doubt we could find much even with that white hacker’s assistance.”

If that hacker girl heard that, it would probably trigger a small Japan-America war, but Maxwell had to have a reason to sound so certain.

“Based on the past half a year of power consumption records, I doubt they have a proper computer inside, so it seems they are not even using an isolated one for standalone data processing.”

“You’re kidding, right? That office is the source of corruption that’s opening a hole in harbor security and setting up a flow of money and goods. They would need some pretty strict data management or they would have no receipts to prove anything if there was some trouble and a precious treasure went missing. Evil Spirit isn’t just one or two burglars and a large organization needs a server system to hold it together. There has to be something there.”

“Such as?”

“Let’s see... What if they have a big battery or a generator in there? Or what if they’ve filled an RV or truck with communication equipment that they park alongside the office at regular intervals?”

“No. Wouldn’t they just use that vehicle as a mobile base instead of using the office?”

“Hmm.”

This was outside Itou Helen’s area of expertise, but that cute blonde underclassman spoke up with a confused tone.

“Senpai, I have a question.”

“What is it?”

“That, um, server system? I assume you mean a big computer, but are you sure it really exists?”

I wasn’t sure what she meant.

I prompted her to continue and she did so.

“Um, couldn’t they just write all the numbers down in paper notebooks? That way not even the greatest expert could steal their data with a computer.”

“.....

“N-no, I’m probably wrong. Sorry. I really shouldn’t have tried to contribute. Never mind. Please forget I said anything. Oh, this is so embarrassing.”

“No, I think you’re right. Yes, paper. That’s it, Maxwell!”

“Sure. Miss Itou Helen, let me buy you a drink some time. (\*´ω`\*)ノ 圭”

“Eh? Eh?”

My cute underclassman grew flustered, but she had definitely accomplished the most here.

“Itou-san, are you familiar with punch cards? Y’know, those paper cards with holes in them. You sometimes see them in old manga and anime when they show those fridge-sized computers.”

“Y-yes. But I thought those had gone away just like records.”

That view would probably anger some audiophiles, but that was probably how you saw it without specialty knowledge.

Anyway.

“Not entirely. Punch cards are still used to manage data. And in cutting-edge facilities.”

“Eh?”

“Printing technology has improved quite a lot since the old days, so enough memory space to hold several movies can be printed on a card along with an ultra-thin printed circuit board,” explained Maxwell. “You end up with something like a bendable piece of cellophane.”

“If you then punch holes in the card, you have something that no machine can read as-is. The only person who can read the data is the person with the second card that fills in the holes,” I added. “Since severing a wire thinner than a hair physically prevents the electricity from getting through, there is no chance of an outside cyber-attack stealing the data. I’ve heard of major corporations keeping their secret ledgers separate from the company servers like that. And since the one card is impossible to read on its own, you can walk around with it in your wallet without fearing what happens if you drop it, forget it somewhere, or have your possessions inspected.”

“I-I see. I’m not sure if that counts as high-tech or low-tech. Um, it reminds me of how the two sides of business deals would press two halves of a broken board together to prove they were dealing with the right person...”

That was basically the same idea. The world of technology did not always leave the past behind. It was all built on a foundation of the past, so returning to that was always an option. There was so much to learn.

Now, it was time to apply that idea to Evil Spirit’s smuggling base.

“They’ve compressed a library,” I said. “The office shelves will be lined with binders or file books stuffed full of cards. I don’t know if it’s in alphabetical order or by date, but they’ll have the shelves, binders, and pages organized in some way that allows them to manage the massive amount of data without a server system to search with.”

“But, Senpai, how is that different from the broken board? The data inside wouldn’t be necessary to check the holes in the card and see that the other person’s card matches it, right?”

“Criminal organizations love high-spec computers because they want to apply randomized processing using long numbers like pi in their search for truly unbreakable encryption. But with punch cards, data encryption isn’t all that important. You can’t read the proper data without physically filling in the printed circuit board’s holes, so they can omit all the cyber-attack countermeasures.”

“Meaning?”

“All they would need is a card reader attached to an outdated mobile device. And those use internal batteries, so it wouldn’t change the office’s power consumption.”

That was enough to see their Achilles heel.

You couldn’t read the data just by inspecting the mountains of cards on the office shelves. Their external business partner had to bring in the corresponding card. Gaining both parts of just one set required opposing both groups, so how much worse would it be to gain both parts for all the cards on the office shelves? That just wouldn’t be possible.

So instead...

“Let’s tamper with the mobile device or card reader they use to read the combined cards. Then we can steal all the data as they’re reading it.”

Yes, there might be thousands or tens of thousands of cards, but there would only be so many readers. And to prevent having them stolen, no one would walk around with them. Capture this one location and we could access all the data.

## Part 4

The harbor area was comprised of a petrochemical complex, a commercial port, and a container yard. There were also couples-oriented attractions like an aquarium, restaurants with a nice view at night, and souvenir shops. It seemed to be made entirely of concrete and the beach and fisheries were classified separately.

The environmental protection group office that Evil Spirit was misusing was at the 3rd dock of the commercial port's cargo area. I recalled the area being in the news because of an infestation of foreign bugs getting in with the containers.

Anyway.

There were a few reinforced concrete structures about the size of a school or hospital, but there was also a two-story prefab building. It was about the size of two convenience stores stacked on top of each other. It stood out as an obvious later addition and it had a power cable leading to a nearby building for electricity. Everything from fiber optic cables to nuclear shelters were buried underground these days, so it was strange seeing such a thick line out in the open.

"Maxwell, check the surrounding data. Pay special attention to the presence of cameras and sensors aimed in from outside."

"Sure. I have found cameras located in the gaps between containers, on the building's roof, and on top of the streetlights. They are all pet-monitoring cameras sold in electronics stores, but they will see you if you approach the office. Shall I deal with them?"

"Cut their power. I want to intentionally trip an alarm and see what happens."

We took up a position a good distance away and forcibly cut the camera footage.

...

30 seconds passed.

“...Um, Senpai?”

“I know. No reaction is the most troublesome reaction of all.”

If a bunch of armed macho men had rushed out to see what was going on, we could have sized up their fighting force, but it wasn't going to be that easy. Was the lack of reaction because there was no one there or because this was not enough to faze them? I had no way of knowing.

“Not that. Um, that prefab building is built along the edge of the concrete wharf, isn't it?”

“What about it?”

“Well, if the cameras are only set up to catch someone ‘approaching on foot’, couldn't we approach from the ocean? We wouldn't even need to dive underwater. If I took on the traits of a jellyfish or sea anemone, I could cling to the wharf or breakwater low enough to not be seen but still out of the water.”

...Did I have a useful underclassman, or what?

Before long, Itou Helen drank the mysterious contents of a test tube, grew a few translucent tentacles from the back of her hips, and approached Evil Spirit's base above the water but below the ground just as she had suggested. Me? I was nothing more than a burden. I was clinging to that slender girl's torso like a koala. And from the front. Yeah!!

“Senpai, that tickles.”

“Man, having permission is the most wonderful thing. Life feels so different when you have something to live for.”

I had my arms and my legs solidly wrapped around her while I pressed my cheek against her from the front. My arms were trembling a fair amount, but... yeah, this had to be the work of endorphins. The cute underclassman power was fully numbing my exhaustion and pain!

The waves could not reach us, but we were below the surface.

Itou Helen clung to the concrete wall as she circled around behind the office.

“The cameras and sensors cannot see you on the ocean-facing side,” said Maxwell. “I estimate that is due to the lack of ground to walk on there. No one should notice you as you climb up.”

“There’s an unbelievably small window up there. Is it in place of a vent?”

“Sh. Wait a second, Senpai.”

Itou Helen’s blonde hair parted as triangular cat ears popped up. They spun around like parabolic antennae, focused on the prefab building’s wall, and enhanced her cuteness.

“I don’t hear anything inside.”

“...”

I could think of a few different possibilities:

1. Evil Spirit just so happened to be out and they would be back eventually.
2. Evil Spirit had already withdrawn from here and they would never be back.

And...

3. Evil Spirit had somehow detected our approach and were holding their breath waiting for us to enter.

“Whatever the case, we need to be careful. This could get nasty.”

“I’m most worried about you, Senpai.”

I heard some buttons being undone and then Itou Helen’s blazer and blouse slid down to expose her slender shoulders. Something grew from each of her bare shoulder blades. They were a crab’s...no, a mantis shrimp’s club legs. They could strike with overwhelming speed and, if their kinetic vision could keep up, it was possible they could strike down a spray of machinegun fire from head on.

“Here I go.”

“Okay.”

It was finally beginning while I was still in koala mode with my chin on her shoulder and my cheek pressed against her.



Just as I thought I heard a spraying sound from her mouth, her mantis shrimp punch moved to smash the frosted glass with a thin transparent film over it. There was no high-pitched shattering sound or knife-like shards. There was only a muffled sound like someone striking the thick side of a plastic greenhouse and the entire piece of glass fell from the frame in one piece.

Oh, god. What had I turned that nervous little animal of a girl into!?

Things progressed quickly from there. Itou Helen grabbed the top of the windowsill with both hands, swung her entire body like a pendulum, and dove legs-first into the prefab building. Since I was clinging to her, it was a lot like riding a roller coaster.

“Senpai, stay with me.”

When my feet finally felt solid ground below them, I exited koala mode, but that seemed to have mildly angered Itou Helen.

But anyway...

“What is this smell?”

It wasn’t old paper.

At the very least, there was no sign of anyone here. Just as we had guessed, the place was full of steel racks and binders. Needless to say, they all contained the cards meant to defend against cyber-attacks.

The oppressive atmosphere was similar to a small used book store. Or maybe like wandering into a small 3D maze.

But like I had said, there was no one here.

That was obvious at a glance. I couldn’t imagine even a ninja or spy could hide their presence here. The air was just too stagnant for it. It was like time had been frozen here well before we arrived. It felt like we had wandered into the wrong place.

“...Senpai.”

Itou Helen belatedly stepped closer to me. This silent pressure was different from a direct fistfight. It felt like we had been holding a shield in front of us when a blow arrived from an entirely different direction to hit us in the side.

The shaking of my eyes was enough to know the adrenaline-blunted fear was gradually returning.

...But what were we so worried about that we could not even bring ourselves to search for the card reader? We knew there was no one here, so what else could it be? It felt wrong to feel so utterly cornered without knowing what it was. We were searching for the cause, even if only to find a way to escape this feeling. We trusted that solving the mystery would reduce the fear.

There were some things in the world you were better off not seeing.

But we ignored that possibility.

“Ah...”

When I peered down the aisles created between the steel racks, I opened my mouth and let out my voice like a complete moron.

Within that strange smell that reminded me of katsuobushi or dried meat, I found it.

A light brown lump was seated and leaning against one of the steel racks. It was a size or two too small to be a human.

I learned something new that day.

I learned just how small and light the human body became when it was dried out and all the moisture was removed.

## Part 5

I did not scream in a clichéd fashion.

I simply fell down into a sitting position. I forgot to inhale or exhale and only managed to flap my mouth open and closed like a goldfish.

“Senpai, is something the-...?”

Itou Helen froze mid-sentence. She must have seen the same thing I had, but I was too preoccupied to ask.

That one light brown lump was all it took to make the entire world feel rotten.

I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. Or even if it was an adult or child. It felt so stripped of humanity that it would have been easier to believe it was a piece of dried driftwood or a Buddhist statue.

“But what does this mean?”

Had this not been Evil Spirit's smuggling base? Had they not left their elites here to open a hole in harbor security and allow their products in and out?

I had to think.

I couldn't give up on thought.

...I didn't need to find the answer right away. I had to list every possibility I could think of. It simply wasn't possible that I couldn't come up with even a single reason why that would be here.

“That's right...”

Possibility 1: Evil Spirit handles any kind of product. Maybe it had yet to be packaged or it had been returned, but this was a black market product.

Possibility 2: Evil Spirit had already withdrawn from here and they left this here as a scapegoat – a lizard's tail.

Possibility 3: A third party had discovered this place before we did and attacked Evil Spirit.

...To be honest, none of them felt convincing.

“Warning: the specific mummification method is unknown, but given the possibility of toxins and infectious disease, please avoid touching it,” said Maxwell. “Also, touching a corpse is not recommended from a legal standpoint.”

“...”

I already knew that.

I wanted to say that out loud, but my lips refused to move. There was apparently a discrepancy between my mental shock and physical shock. Fingerprints, hairs, sweat, saliva. I could no longer remember how many traces of my presence I had left here.

“Senpai.”

I was at a complete loss, but my cute underclassman tugged on my jacket.

“What should we do, Senpai? Should we, um, call the police?”

I didn’t have anything clever to say.

I’m pretty sure I just sat there for quite a while.

Finally, my tongue moved with the speed of a slug and I managed to speak.

“Maxwell. Let’s do this without touching it. We’ll use the camera to analyze it as much as possible.”

“That does not sound pleasant, but sure.”

What was that mummy? Was it part of some kind of Voodoo ritual? Damn, if only I had Ayumi with me. These regrets always had a way of catching up with me.

However.

“Warning.”

“Did you find something, Maxwell?”

“Pay careful attention to the corner of the lips and the neck.”

Bluish-white light marked a portion of the scene viewed through the smartphone screen.

And that was when I saw it.

Fangs in the mouth...

...and a bite mark on the neck?

“Wait...”

A powerful alarm began blaring in my head. My experience told me just what these things meant. I couldn't help but reach that conclusion.

“Then...then what is this? Does it mean this is a Vampire like Erika?”

Were they part of the 13 Eastern European Families?

Damn. All I had was this transformed mummy to look at and I had only caught a glimpse of the Vampires other than Fly and Meslayate. I wasn't confident enough to say which one was which.

“Knowing they are a Vampire does not tell us whether they were a victim or attacker,” said Maxwell. “Did a Vampire attack Evil Spirit, or did Evil Spirit kill a Vampire? It is impossible to say.”

“But they're mummified. Don't Vampires turn to ashes when they die?”

“Beheading and burning corpses are methods used to prevent them from becoming Vampires. And one reason Vampires suck blood is to preserve the youthfulness of their body and improve their complexion, so the opposite might be possible. Although it is unclear if this was intended to kill them or restrain them nonlethally.”

“Um...you're doing a lot of speculation there. We don't even know how they were dried out. Was it with fire and heat, or was it with a drying agent like concentrated sulfuric acid or calcium chloride?”

Itou Helen started listing off chemicals while peering over at my smartphone and Maxwell provided an accurate response.

“I would like a source for your claims. It is always possible they could begin

moving in that state, so I do not recommend touching them until we have more information.”

A Vampire had to suck out a lethal amount of blood to create another one, so it shouldn't be that easy.

But if two people were grappling and rolling on the floor, would sucking blood be a viable attack method? They might bite with their mouth instead of constricting a joint or artery with an arm or leg.

I had already seen what that Voodoo Bokor could do in the underground tunnels.

But anyone could be turned into a Vampire if they were bitten by one. And that did not just give you extra powers; it came with a common set of weaknesses that could effectively level the playing field. It was possible a Vampire would “weaken” a Bokor like that and immediately do something they themselves feared to settle things quickly.

However...

“We’re switching from Evil Spirit and back to the Vampires again?”

Something bothered me about this.

We had arrived here by gathering all the hints lying around, revealing the true faces of various enemies, fighting, and surviving.

But.

Wasn't this a kind of weird?

“The presence of a Vampire corpse here may mean the assumptions and safety of the 13 Eastern European Families have crumbled,” said Maxwell. “It is possible one of the members did this and then hid that fact, or that someone from Evil Spirit became a Vampire and took one of the proper members’ places.”

“Oh, my. That sounds dangerous, Senpai. You need to let your older sister know right away.”

“No. We should suspect all of the Vampires equally, including Amatsu Erika, and rebuild a safe zone by clearing your suspicions one at a time. Luckily, it is

currently daytime, so the Vampires' options are limited. This will be another long night, so you should come up with a plan for after sunset."

No.

That wasn't it.

I didn't know who was on my side and who wasn't. Wasn't this just like when Fly Villiers had set up that game? Besides, the issue bothering me was nothing so recent!

"Are we really on the right track here?"

"Senpai?"

"I mean, it makes no sense! First Evil Spirit, then the Vampires, and what next? Are we going to find the Hidden Cloud again, negotiate with a hacker, and find Evil Spirit yet again? It feels like we're making progress, but we aren't at all! It's not a perfect loop, but aren't we spiraling around the same circle with only the specific radius of the vortex changing each time!? We just end up in the same place over and over!!"

"No. Please make a suggestion based on objective evidence, not your subjective impression. Let's say you roll a die three times and get 6 each time. Humans will imagine a special meaning or unseen rule behind it, but it is a simple matter of probability. Your issue here has no basis in fact."

Yeah.

Probably not.

Looking at it normally, I was acting crazy. We kept finding hints and making progress, so it was silly to decide we were at a standstill.

But wasn't it a little too blatant?

We were like a bird being led by a trail of seeds on the ground. Was I really finding this information of my own free will? Had I narrowed my vision too far?

I didn't know who had done it.

But if they were spending their own money to lay a trail of bait on the ground, they had to be leading us somewhere. Or did they just want to distract us? But

from what? What was going on outside this vortex? What did they gain from this? It was like braving the darkness with nothing but a cheap flashlight. Something crucially important could be sitting right outside the narrow beam.

I had an uncomfortable feeling like someone had maliciously shut off the lights, handed me a puny flashlight, and then laid out reflective landmarks. I couldn't celebrate at this new discovery.

"Where did it really begin?"

I groaned.

I muttered.

I had to shut off the light and let my eyes adjust to the darkness.

I wouldn't find anything by taking the easy way out and following the obvious trail. I couldn't rush toward the light. I had to brave the darkness. There had to be something beyond this unpleasant feeling.

"Evil Spirit, the 13 Eastern European Families, the Hidden Cloud. That forms one cycle. I can't escape the vortex by following that never-ending circle. Then where did I enter this closed vortex? Where was the interchange or junction?"

I could swear I heard cracks running through space itself.

Words left me like from a tightly-stretched magnetic tape.

"Senpai, there was no beginning."

"Sure. You are overthinking this."

"We found a new clue, so isn't that enough? Let's see where it leads us."

"Yes, that is the best option."

I felt like I was going to hear someone say "there is a cave east of the village" before long. It sounded like a conversation, but there was never anything behind it. When did you two get so flat!? This was what happened the instant I started focusing outside the vortex. Of course everything was going to seem weird!!

There was something wrong with the entire world.

But I had to have already seen the answer.



A simulator, the Great Spirit, the zoo, a car chase, a Bokor, Zombies, Voodoo, Vampires, flies, rotting, the multi-purpose building, an event, an abandoned factory, a Werewolf, transformation, a shallow connection between a billion people with the possibility of multiple accounts, hackers, VR.

There was plenty of material to work with.

This was not the time to rush onwards. I had to come to a stop and turn back. I had to rollback my awareness. I had to focus on the vortex and outside it.

I had to set aside the concepts of enemy and ally, cast off the bonds of common sense, and declare reality unnecessary.

At some point, something had been injected into this incident.

But when?

I needed to figure that out.

Where had it first started feeling off?

## Part 6

**“Finding a mummified corpse there is just too much to accept.”**

**“Could a Hidden Cloud with a billion accounts worldwide really exist?”**

**“I doubt just Ayumi and I could have defeated Meslayate in the abandoned factory to rescue Erika.”**

**“It seems suspect that I was able to defeat the entire 13 Eastern European Families in the Starlight Kukyou multi-purpose building.”**

**“Did I really defeat Fly Villiers, the military uniform Vampire, in that elevator?”**

**“I can’t believe what happened in the fight with the Bokor in the Bright Cross’s underground tunnels.”**

**“The car chase with Valkyrie Karen was too bizarre.”**

**“Did the Class Rep really have her soul removed by those three girls?”**

## **[crucial notice] Corporate Pamphlet Concerning VR Competition [on the pinup board]**

The standard nowadays uses the same excess brain activity during sleep that dreams do, but in the early days of VR, a variety of methods were attempted and discarded.

You may remember the goggle variety that combined flashing lights with déjà vu, the helmet variety that controlled the active portions of the brain by heating and cooling the head, and the mask variety that used a cocktail of scent particles to stimulate the hippocampus.

But did you know that these crystallizations of precision machinery were actually inspired by a variety of other fields?

The dreamcatchers of North American natives. The Dionysian Mysteries used by ancient Greek priestesses to receive divine oracles. The Norse ritual of the Seidr trance. The Fan Hun Xiang incense passed down from ancient China. The Astral Projection and Telesmatic Images of modern Western magic. Even without any specialized knowledge, the word “self-enchantment” might summon the right image to mind.

Many methods of actively viewing or controlling dreams and hallucinations have been tested since ancient times, so we must learn from the past just like developing a new bulletproof jacket based on the structure of a spider’s web.

# Chapter 8

## Part 1

The answer was obvious.

“They’re all wrong...”

Now that I understood, I couldn’t believe I hadn’t noticed until now.

“This entire series of events was an illusion from the very beginning! That’s the answer!!”

Stare at a “spot the difference” image without any differences for long enough and everything might start looking suspicious. You might start seeing deeper meaning in everything, like you were succumbing to gestaltzerfall. My own doubts would only be confusing the incident further.

But that wasn’t the case here.

I couldn’t pinpoint an initial impression and I couldn’t find any evidence once I started looking. But that did not mean I was imagining things and it wasn’t there. This was the correct conclusion:

Every last part of it was fake.

If even the smallest details had been smoothly taken over, searching was meaningless.

...For one thing, what were the Zombies that Evil Spirit...no, that Voodoo as a whole excelled at?

What were those true Archenemies like Ayumi?

They had been born of a certain virus that had mutated into an acute form after exposure to the traditional enchantment drug used in the Caribbean.

But.

Contact with the virus had been a complete coincidence, but what had been the original purpose of that drug? It was a combination of several chemical compounds including the tetrodotoxin found in pufferfish.

I didn't know what old words they used for it, like Ti Bon Ange or Nanm, but didn't it rob people of the ability to think, allow them to be buried alive to fake their death and strip them of their civil rights, and then destroy their brain just enough to keep them alive as a malleable puppet once they were dug back up? That utterly bizarre nonlethal poison had been improved generation after generation in the serious desire to punish criminals with forced labor.

In other words, Voodoo drugs were used on the human brain.

If you were exposed to that toxin, wasn't it possible you could be made to dream or hallucinate whatever someone wanted?

Once I was looking at things correctly, everything seemed to crumble away.

Everything rolled back to the point where it had branched off.

"Ugh, cough, gasp!?"

Everything's outlines blurred several times over. The wild dance of psychedelic colors would not stop. Not even the ground would stay flat and the wobbling of the earth filled me with nausea, but then the scene smoothly changed altogether.

I was at school.

And it was night?

I saw the familiar scene of my high school, albeit at a different time than normal. I was...near the courtyard. I was curled up and leaning against the outside of the school building while sweating profusely.

But...

How far had it rolled back? Where had the lies begun? That was obvious if

you arranged it all in a timeline and traced your finger back. If it had been a lie from the very, very beginning and the incident had yet to occur in reality...

Then.

It was about to happen.

The Class Rep was going to have her soul removed in that love fortunetelling set up by those three rotten girls!

“Oh, right... Hey, Maxwell!”

I couldn't control my wobbling vision as I leaned against the school building and shouted into my smartphone.

“Sorry about getting lost in that mental labyrinth. Ahh, I should've noticed something was off when that idiot Ayumi was clever enough to think Evil Spirit was suspicious again! And I was too cavalier about the driver dying in that car chase! Anyway, what's the situation!?”

“Sure. Misses Amatsu Erika and Ayumi have already entered the school, but the battle is still ongoing.”

“Those monstrous sisters are working together and they still can't finish it right away?”

I felt something on my neck. Thinking it was a bug, I brought my empty hand there and shuddered when I felt something solid. When I carefully pulled it out, I found something like a syringe with an aircraft-like tail.

It was a dart from a dart gun.

Was that what had injected the Voodoo drug into my system? There were a number of nonlethal weapons – tranquilizer guns, rubber bullets, stun guns – but they weren't a sure thing. Every method carried the risk of actually killing the target. A perfectly safe attack that would prevent the target from waking up no matter what you did to them was, in a way, far more valuable than a simple lead bullet. While I was trapped in that mental vortex, I had been in a state where I could be killed or left alive at the enemy's convenience.

For example, if you had a method of remotely forcing someone into a state of astral projection, you could attack their defenseless body all you wanted.

The dart filled with the Voodoo drug had transformed that absurd idea into a viable method.

“This is my school, right? What happened to the night school students?”

“They were contacted through the mailing list to say classes were canceled for emergency maintenance to fix a gas leak.”

I irritatedly tossed aside the tranquilizer cartridge I held and viewed Maxwell’s report.

...Was it actually possible to escape that state on my own? Perhaps I only managed it thanks to the light and noise that a VR expert like Maxwell used to call out to me.

Simply reading through the text created a wave of nausea within me, but I couldn’t be picky right now.

“Who’s the enemy and who’s on our side?”

“The main members of Andou Star, Sagawa Akemi, and Hishigami Ai are not much of a threat, but the Bokor that the Evil Spirit Voodoo black market sent to support them is a different matter altogether.”

Him, huh?

That Bokor was really just a human, right? He seemed to use drugs or potions like Itou Helen the Witch, but it was still impressive he could take on multiple Archenemies at once.

“Let’s meet up with Erika and Ayumi to save the Class Rep. Search out the source of the noise using my phone’s microphone and find the best route.”

“I do not recommend entering the building at all...”

“You don’t have to add the ellipsis. I know you’re always correct. But the world is a strange place where you’ll be left with nothing but regrets if you always choose what’s correct. Just do the search.”

“Sure.”

When I viewed the school through the smartphone, a very long green arrow appeared. I crouched low, stayed by the wall, picked up a gardening shovel



heavier than a metal bat, and stepped inside the school building from a random sliding door.

The viscosity of the air changed.

I was even more reluctant to continue than if I had gotten a face full of spider web inside an abandoned house. It felt like I was submerging my face in a washbasin of rotten animal blood and guts. All of my senses were exposed to an unpleasant stickiness and slight warmth. How much of it was an illusion and how much was toys made from flour? If I didn't stay focused, I would start to see long hands and purple shadows approaching from the corners of my vision.

I held the shovel handle below my arm and tried using my hand to cover my mouth and nose with a handkerchief, but there was nothing in my pocket. Damn, had I dropped it somewhere? It wasn't that it was there and I wasn't able to perceive it, right?

"Should I focus more on what the screen shows than on what my naked eyes see, Maxwell?"

"No. Even if the mechanical sensors cannot be fooled, what you see on the screen is still reliant on your own senses and thus you cannot fully trust the information you see there. You made that mistake last time as well."

It wasn't just a psychological effect.

If they were using a secret drug that stimulated my hormones, brain chemicals, pheromones, etc., then this was about chemistry. Just like you couldn't deflect sulfuric acid with pure willpower, this was more than guts and mental fortitude could handle.

Everything inside was worse than on the outside. Erika and Ayumi's rampage had left broken glass everywhere, but that might have been to help air the place out.

I could hear explosions and destruction from overhead. While dust fell from the ceiling, I grabbed the shovel's handle once more and followed the smartphone's arrow to the stairs.

I saw someone on the landing.

The moonlight shined on a small Vampire with short silver hair, a baggy black military uniform jacket worn like a dress, and a synthetic material covering her slender legs.

“Fly Villiers!?”

“Oh, the younger brother. I had wondered where you got off to. I am glad to see you are safe.”

I tensed all of my muscles and tried to figure out what I could do with the shovel if it came to that, but something about that silver fly’s response seemed off.

Wait.

What was this relaxed and friendly atmosphere?

“Maxwell. Is she on our side?”

“Sure. There might be some confusion in your memories, but she belongs to the 13 Eastern European Families and is an old acquaintance of Miss Amatsu Erika.”

...That was all correct, but it wasn’t enough to erase my suspicion. And with Fly fixing her flat hat in front of me, I couldn’t directly ask Maxwell if she was a traitor who had joined the Hidden Cloud to take revenge against the gods!

“Is something the matter, younger brother?”

“Oh, right. What about Meslayate? He should-...”

That proud Vampire would never join the Hidden Cloud...except once I started thinking about it, I realized that knowledge came from the dream or hallucination produced by the Voodoo drug. How much of that – if any – was real?

Was Fly Villiers an enemy?

Was Meslayate an ally?

Or was it the exact opposite?

Damn, if it had all been complete nonsense, I could have just reset all my knowledge. But it borrowed some details here and there, so I had no way of

knowing how much of the data I could keep.

I needed to solidify my knowledge starting with what I knew for sure.

“So where are Erika and Ayumi?”

“Upstairs,” said Fly. “About half the reason they have shifted fully into attack mode is because you went missing after being shot by that dart gun, younger brother. They asked me to transform into a swarm of flies and search for you.”

If that was true, it meant Erika and Ayumi at least believed Fly was trustworthy.

However, that silver-haired Vampire was still in her girl form and there was an ominous aura around her. Yes, it came from her feet. It felt like there was a rotten bog down there in the darkness the moonlight could not penetrate.

It was bubbling.

And smoldering.

“And be very careful, younger brother.”

“Hm?”

“That Bokor has redefined the battlefield into a truly devilish place. Simply seeing it is not enough to drive you mad, but there is much wandering this place, so I must ask that you do not leave my side.”

Maxwell did not send a warning popup, so she must not have been bluffing so she could stab me in the back.

I adjusted my grip on the shovel.

“...Let’s go join my sisters.”

“Yes. That would be the best way to cool those living catastrophes’ heads.”

I walked through the moonlit school building with the black-uniformed silver fly.

What had they originally been made from?

Strange black and purple shapes wriggled about as if to block the hallways or stairs. Were they not just hallucinations!?

“Excuse me, younger brother.”

Before they could jump at us, Fly sent out a swarm of silver flies and quickly rotted them. All that remained was a sour stench that made me feel dizzy.

“It appears something has been mixed into life-sized flour dolls. I was convinced it was an army of the rotting dead approaching.”

“Archenemies are still living beings. If he was creating Zombies at random, he would have a hard time controlling the extent of the damage.”

...The Vampires may have still been restraining themselves because of Erika’s influence, but it was also a lot of work to create more Vampires since they had to suck out a lethal amount of blood. Even that world-famous Transylvanian count had attacked a victim over multiple nights to spread it out. Their situation was very different from the Acute Zombie Powder which could trigger a pandemic with a single bite.

I occasionally glimpsed something odd out the windows. There were forms climbing the opposite school building’s wall and something like the sparks of locked blades.

Wait, were those not illusions?

“Oh, would you look at that. It seems Meslayate and Elizabeth are here too. It has been a while since we fought alongside the Queen, so we may be getting a little carried away for our ages.”

...They were all working together?

What about the traitors who had sided with the Hidden Cloud? Was that not a thing in reality? That would be great if so, but wait. Then what about the Bokor sent by Evil Spirit? Erika, Ayumi, and the 13 Eastern European Families were working together, so they could control the battle without worrying about a pandemic. But did that mean their opponent had yet to be defeated? When he was a human and alone!? A Zombie’s strength was 10 times a human’s and a Vampire’s was 20 times. Then there were the irregular powers like Fly Villiers’s that had nothing to do with physical strength. Fighting against all that with a dart gun and some creatures could not be easy. Didn’t this mean the Bokor was holding his own while entirely outnumbered!?

We were approaching the explosive booms.

The blast site was up ahead.

My legs kept moving, but my soul was trying to reject something. My hand holding the shovel was slippery with sweat. My soul was telling me not to look. It told me the truth I would find up ahead would not work in my favor.

Was it lucky or unlucky that short Fly Villiers was by my side?

At any rate, I had arrived at the final stage in the depths of the school.

And there I found...

“Ah.”

A few figures were locked in combat along the long, long hallway. Two sides were holding a fight to the death. Needless to say, one side was Erika in her blade-resistant gothic lolita dress with a long skirt with the front wide open and tight black leather pants and Ayumi in her midriff-exposing jogging clothes with an unzipped track suit jacket over it. The other side was the Bokor with a black suit, tie, and glasses.

“Ahh...”

And standing there to protect him was someone in blue armor and a miniskirt. A heavenly messenger with a gold spear and shield.

She was a warrior maiden from Norse Mythology.

A Valkyrie.

“Ahhhhh!?”

...It was entirely possible.

He only needed to use that Voodoo drug on her brain. Just like I had stayed in one place while thinking I was making progress, it was possible he could bind and control that goddess even if he could not kill her. Her movements were like someone tossing and turning in their sleep. And it was true that you would need a legendary god or Demon Lord to hold their own against Erika, Ayumi, and the 13 Eastern European Families.

How much of a threat was this?

The same as my stepmom Lilith? The same as the giant Leviathan shark? Even more!?

“Fuguu!? You...!!”

“Oh, Satori-kun. I’m glad to see she found you safe.”

But.

Even so...

“Blrgh...”

I heard a highly unpleasant noise like someone had stuck their mouth to a drain and slurped up the gloop within.

That was a blue butterfly thrashing about in a nightmare after being robbed of all thought and rationality.

Karen’s right hand flashed.

“!?”

Fly Villiers’s small hand shoved me and I slammed back-first into the hallway wall.

Immediately afterwards, the heavy gold spear melted into liquid and swallowed up the girl in a baggy black uniform. My shovel was useless. That was a legit heavenly spear that could flip over an armored truck.

The girl’s shape had shattered.

If she had been unable to break apart into a swarm of silver flies, she really would have been pulverized.

“Blrgh! Gurgle!! Blrsh!!”

I gulped while too preoccupied to wipe the cold sweat from my brow.

To be honest, having a god like Valkyrie Karen controlled by a human was an even greater shock to my heart than I had imagined. Could humans really pull this off? Was this really allowed? The word “taboo” bounced wildly through my mind. The Voodoo Evil Spirit gave people everything they wanted if they sacrificed the person they loved most and I felt like I had caught a glimpse of what that truly meant.

And he spoke.

He spoke as a Bokor of Voodoo, that flexible religion that would appropriate the teachings of any other religion and make it their own.

“It is no use. The concept of enemy and ally is of no consequence to me. Any form of flesh is no more than an ingredient to a Bokor.”

Of course, surprise attacks were flying back and forth even as he spoke. Erika’s black-gloved hand grabbed a fire extinguisher. If she threw that with strength 20 times that of a human, it would become a metal artillery shell.

It audibly tore through the air and the Bokor’s silhouette collapsed.

No, that wasn’t simple destruction.

His body swirled around like milk being stirred into a cup of coffee. He had dodged. That’s what it was. The fire extinguisher just barely missed its target and then white wings flew through the air.

Yes, the Bokor had changed form.

From a human to a giant swan.

I initially thought I had been dragged back into a hallucination, but that wasn’t what this was. Erika and Ayumi were focused on the same thing.

But for them, it did not seem to be their first time seeing it.

“Voodoo practitioners can call down any god and make its power their own. And the word Zombie originally referred to the end result of injecting someone with a special drug, dividing their body into its 5 physical and spiritual components, and rebinding all except the Z’Etoile and Ti Bon Ange to control them as you wish.”

“Kh.”

Then Ayumi smashed the fluorescent ceiling light and grabbed it, but the heavenly swan only laughed sinisterly while gliding in the air.

Nothing they threw at him had any effect.

He wasn’t particularly fast, but he dodged it all by twisting around in midair. His movements were a lot like a leaf floating in the water.

“And you keep the separated Ti Bon Ange on hand as a controller. ...A normal human can only do so much, but Karen is a god, after all. The Ti Bon Ange controls the target’s memories and knowledge, so I only need to use the drug to draw it out of her. I can control the acts of a goddess to trigger a miracle within my own human body. The ability to transform into a swan is one example. Apparently, if a human man takes a Valkyrie’s swan raiment, she loses her ability to return to heaven. In other words, it is something humans may touch and control.”

Damn, first Itou Helen the Witch and now this. Did the intellectual type really like transforming into animals or something?

And whatever the logic behind it, we still had to stop Karen.

“Does that mean you can fight with more than just Karen now? Like taking pieces in shogi?”

“You seem to be mistaken about something,” said the giant swan with a sticky sigh. “My greatest pawn is you, boy. You have no direct combat ability, but you are obviously at the center of the diagram. And did you think pulling the dart from your neck was enough to remove the toxin from your body? Your Ti Bon Ange remains in my grasp.”



## Part 2

Psychedelic colors filled my vision. The outlines to everything blurred several times over and pulsed like an EKG.

I was afraid to be holding a weapon with that going on. I tried to let go of the shovel, but had I really managed it? I still felt like something was sticking to my palm.

“Onii-...!? agmtk”

“bmyqd. –ri-kun, no...try to stay-...!!”

They had to be shouting right next to me, but their voices seemed to bend and spin around my skull several times. I couldn’t judge their distance and the pitches wandered unnaturally.

When I tried to focus on any one voice in particular, an intense nausea rose within me.

...This was bad.

Giving up on my body here was the same as being taken hostage. Erika, Ayumi, and the 13 Eastern European Families would be restricted by the need to protect me. And if they came to a stop, they would be hunted down by Karen’s power!

I had to make a decision.

I used my head as a hammer by swinging it back and then slamming my forehead toward that gathering of fluctuating wave lines.

With a loud noise, the bright colors dimmed and the wave lines became the hallway wall once more. I could even tell the shovel had fallen to the cold floor.

“Hm, primitive but effective. Apply a shock to the head to disturb the transfer of information between synapses and it will trigger a malfunction in both your

normal thoughts and the drug's effects. That is one way to force back your chemically-separated Ti Bon Ange."

The Bokor remained confident in his giant swan form that Karen's power had given him.

"But that only provides a brief moment of clarity. Try to continually maintain control of yourself that way and you will end up splitting your head open."

I felt like an invisible hand had grasped my brain once more. It didn't hurt. Nothing was touching my tongue, but it was unbelievably sweet!?

...Nhhhhhh!?

Ghhh, I had to stay conscious and find – nhhh – some way to get rid of these colors and fluctuating outlines.

"Agh, are...are you at the center...of the Hidden Cloud!?"

"Ha ha. A laudable effort, I must admit. But even if I told you the truth now, you would be unable to distinguish it from a dream."

"Bbh..."

Were Karen and the others still fighting? Or was I simply hearing things after smashing my forehead against the wall? Either way, I heard an irregular series of explosions.

"Also, we are not the center of the Hidden Cloud. It is a snake biting its own tail. Someone ordered that impossible structure and we gave it concrete form. Thus, it is not possible for you to destroy."

I heard laughter.

The perspective was all wrong. A shining swan should never have looked bigger than the moon.

"The Hidden Cloud has roots everywhere. Even within this friendly group here. ...Of course, siding against me here works in their favor. That way someone on the Hidden Cloud's side will remain no matter who wins. Truly an ideal situation."

...Was that just a bluff meant to drive a wedge between us? Or was it the

unadulterated truth?

“Class Rep...”

“Oh, I have nothing against her. It is just that her soul – well, the Gros Bon Ange and Ti Bon Ange portions of it – happened to be a product. We normally never assist someone before the rite of passage is complete, but the circulation would stall if it grew too difficult. So we do occasionally accept orders before the payment has arrived.”

“That’s the...only reason?”

“Of course, once we have accepted it, we will receive payment one way or another. Class Rep did you call her? If the removal of her soul fails, then we will be taking a soul from one of those three girls. As long as the numbers work out in the end, the details are of no consequence to us.”

...It had been obvious enough when he drugged me with that dart, but this guy really was the worst. He had gone beyond pure malice and was becoming no more than a part of the black market system. Even if the Calamity rose to the surface and the earth was on its very last day, he would probably be clapping his hands to hawk his wares with some kind of bizarre apocalypse sale. He might have seen droughts and famines as no more than a chance to profit.

The scenery wobbled in time with my pulse.

I was wandering back and forth between a dream and reality.

Whenever I tried to focus on an individual change, I felt an intense wave of nausea like I was staring at a flashing light.

...Dammit...

If I was knocked out here, I would only be a burden on Erika and Ayumi. They would have to continue fighting Karen while defending me. What was right and what was wrong? Even that was unclear as everything melted together, but was there anything I could do? I had to find a way to save my family!

“Kyahh!?”

Who was screaming? Did it matter who? Dammit. Karen, I thought you were an unbeatable goddess who could keep a cold smile on her face at all times.

How can you let yourself lose to some weird foreign term? How messed up is your mind if you're letting a human manipulate you!?

...

...No.

Wait a second...

Something felt off about the dull pain afflicting my head. It was like a lightbulb had switched on. Remember. Rewind your thoughts. This isn't a one-off gag on TV that everyone forgets as soon as it's over. You have to be able to remember this!

"That's right..."

I still wasn't sure I was seeing the world around me right.

I was on the verge of having my brain controlled by that Voodoo drug.

But.

Even so.

"Could it be?"

## Part 3

I couldn't tell which way was which, my sense of time was all messed up, and the world looked like wildly fluctuating colors, but I saw Karen's right arm wriggle while her blue butterfly hair swished behind her. Even without the drug influencing me, I never could have dodged that attack. She was a legit god of war. Just as human feet could not outrun a cheetah, cleverness and effort were useless in the face of differing bodily structures.

But I still didn't give up.

I seemed to wander between two worlds with each beat of my heart, but I slowly swayed to the side.

And I spoke.

"Maxwell, begin recording. Once you've taken a few samples, run an analysis and build a flowchart."

The sound of the air being torn and roasted by friction filled the late night school. There was a hole in the wall and a Campus Beautification Committee poster was torn in two, but that was the extent of the damage.

There was no dodging a goddess's attack.

So the only option was to make her miss.

And I did that by flashing my smartphone's light as she attacked.

It was a close call.

That torrent of liquefied gold had passed by just a few millimeters away from my right ear.

"Were you simply lucky? No."

I heard a questioning voice.

Karen's mind had been cut away, so she had no understanding of the

situation. She would not know if her attack had hit or missed, so it was not her voice. The confusion came from the Bokor controlling her.

The gold reversed course and returned to Karen's hand. She launched another attack, but I made another strobe light flash and swayed to the side just before she did. I was basically staggering, but the wall of bright light did its thing. I somehow managed to avoid the gold attack by a few centimeters.

Yes.

With nothing more than a camera flash. My resistance was puny compared to an exciting roundhouse kick or Frankensteiner, but a portion of the stimulus reached Karen as she wandered between dreams and reality. Just like an experiment to see if light and room temperature could change someone's dream. And even if I could do it at the press of a button, it was still risky.

Human kinetic vision and reflexes could never keep up, but I knew when she would attack and could act in advance. That way I could use my smartphone's flash to protect myself with a veil of light. I stood a step ahead of Valkyrie Karen.

If my timing was off even a little, it wouldn't work.

This was different again from when my dad had used a thick tarp against the Echidna in the depths of Absolute Noah.

"There must be a reason. But your muscles and nerves are too slow to explain it. Did the drug alter your nerve transmission speed?"

"...It's nothing that fancy. B-b-but I'd be l-l-l-l-lying if I said it wasn't thanks to you...bleh."

I didn't know if the problem was with my tongue or my ears, but my voice didn't sound right.

Yes, I was still under the effects of the Bokor's drug.

I had not fully removed it from my mind or body. He supposedly had a position of absolute superiority where he could crush my brain like an overripe tomato.

But.

That was my greatest trump card at the moment.

“Karen and I are under the i-i-i-influence of the same drug, so we have to be e-e-e-experiencing the same symptoms.”

“Why would that-...no, wait.”

“If Karen is s-s-s-s-seeing the same thing as me while swinging that golden sp-sp-spear around, I sh-sh-sh-should know what timing she’ll use. That dream or illusion might be vague and out of Erika and A-A-A-Ayumi’s grasp, but I’m on that s-s-s-same trip away from r-r-r-r-reality. I know what Karen is feeling far more v-v-v-v-vividly than anyone else!”

The golden torrent shot out a third and fourth time, but it didn’t matter.

I wasn’t viewing it with my eyes.

Nor was I listening to it with my ears.

Those senses would be much too slow.

Karen and I were suffering from the same hallucination, so we were connected to the same world. Yes, and we could influence each other. Just like how you could try to scoop up a leaf floating in a pool and a slight current would allow it to slip away from you like it had a mind of its own. That was how significant this connection was.

Gods like Karen intentionally placed themselves in a divine territory from which they could look down at us humans, but the Voodoo Bokor had used his drug to separate her from that.

I could use that to my advantage.

I would strip them of what made them special by arrogantly standing on the same field as a god.

The swan-transformed Bokor must have realized I was just going to keep dodging the attacks because he sprinkled something from his large wings. Some kind of powder scattered from between the white feathers. The psychedelic colors grew brighter and Karen exploded while with her spear and shield at the ready. No, she jumped straight up and broke through the duct above her.

She vanished from view for a few seconds.

But she would arrive in a devastating location before anyone could rationally analyze the situation.

Yes.

She would take up a position directly above me to target my head.

I knew that.

I couldn't see her, but we were still connected. And I didn't need to rely on the hallucination every single time.

I had told Maxwell to analyze the movement routine and create a flowchart. A machine could not see biological hallucinations, but Maxwell could still observe my breathing, eye movements, and tension and relaxation of facial muscles. Measuring my eyes' focus distance would be enough to tell where I was seeing a ghost. By indirectly sharing that "nonexistent information", the data would accumulate and perhaps lead to a method of predicting Karen's next move.

"Text, vibration, audio, electric currents, and the flavor and smell caused by battery heat. Beginning transfer of all 5 senses (+ some extra information) to the user," said Maxwell. "If you think you can overwrite all of this, then just try it, Evil Spirit."

Karen's attack was sure to reach me no matter where I ran. For now, I picked up the shovel lying at my feet.

"Predict Karen's action!"

"I do not recommend-..."

"Just do the calculation!!"

I didn't have time to read it all. As soon as I shouted that, blue and gold lightning struck. No, this was a guillotine-like shield bash that broke through the duct and ceiling panel.

There was no more text or audio from my smartphone. The electrical stimulus of its internal power shot from my fingertips to my elbow. There was no bravery here. My arm shot up on its own to swing up the shovel handle. I regathered strength in my muscles on the way up and tried to catch the edge of the shield with all the strength an amateur could muster.



A dull sound exploded out.

“Onii-chan, your arm...!?”

...I expected that, so don't give me that tearful look, Ayumi!!

My wrist and elbow were overwhelmed by a pain far worse than having your teeth worn down. The heavy shield had lost some of its force, but it still pushed on. My hand had already been destroyed, but I had never expected to conveniently defeat a true goddess without getting hurt, even if she was drugged up. I had to avoid having my skull split open at all costs, so I used the slight deceleration to swing my head to the side with all my might.

The impact fell on my right shoulder.

It was further out than my ear or collarbone.

Swinging my head should have shifted my balance to the left, but the powerful force swung me back to the right. But I had to stay positive and remember it could have been worse. I could have lost my arm. No, I could have had my head split open and my brains splattered across the floor.

My back teeth were chattering unnaturally.

I may have been fortunate the narrow duct had prevented her from using the long spear. She had failed to kill me.

So.

I had used the shovel and my right shoulder to somehow stop the Valkyrie's midair attack. If I pushed from here, she would screw up her landing and fall over. But I couldn't manage to move my legs to reach her predicted landing point. I could tell the pain in my wrist and shoulder would explode and keep me from moving.

So I shouted at the top of my lungs.

I was only a high school boy. I knew I was going to scream even if I clenched my mouth shut, so all I had to do was make sure it took the form of meaningful words.

Would I call out to Erika, Ayumi, or the silver fly?

But for some reason, I shouted a different name.

It had only happened in the hallucination.

I had no proof anything like that had happened in reality. And yet...

“M-M-M-Mesl-l-layaaaaaaaaaaaaate!!”

A violent wind roared.

We were on the third floor, but the window next to me shattered, the aluminum frame was smashed to pieces, and an extra-large furball flew toward Karen in a barely-controlled leap. He bit at her side, shattered her blue armor, sent shining shards flying everywhere, broke through the wall behind her, and tumbled with her into the empty classroom beyond.

“Onii-chan!”

“Don’t worry about...Ayumi...j-just get...Karen...shield and spear!”

My tongue wouldn’t move how I wanted, but I managed to get that much out while tossing aside the broken shovel handle and leaning against a column.

The pain from my shoulder and wrist would come roaring back soon.

I wouldn’t be able to think straight for much longer!

Erika used her boot to kick the ultra-heavy spear lying on the hallway floor and it flew into black-uniformed Fly Villiers’s gloved hands. Once the silver fly had caught it, it was over. Pure gold’s value came from its resistance to oxidation and corrosion, but there were exceptions to all things. Just like pure gold would dissolve in aqua regia, the spear melted into a black sludge in Fly’s hands.

Based on that, I had to question how well plastic tape and zip ties would work on her.

Anyway.

“Now just...the shield!!”

That was when I heard an explosive noise. I looked over in surprise just in time to hear another.

Valkyrie Karen had been pinned down by such a large figure, but she used just

her arm to swing up the round shield with enough force to knock Meslayate's jaw straight up!

This was bad.

Karen was getting up again!

"What a pain. But it is what it is."

That exasperated comment came from Erika. But what was this? She was squeezing and crushing something in her slender black-gloved hands.

"Karen loses control of her weapons if they cease to be pure gold, correct? In that case, we might have a chance. Yes, because you can find it anywhere."

"Erika?"

"Satori-kun, it is true pure gold is so highly valued because of its resistance to oxidation and its rarity. That is obvious from its occasional use in coins and crowns." She continued crushing something with her superhuman strength. "But very few treasures and coins use 100% pure gold. Most of them mix in some silver or copper...or in the worst cases, lead or tin. You remember the task Archimedes was given by the king, don't you? Find a way to tell how many impurities there were in his gold crown."

So...

Wait, is that what she's saying!?

"History has proven it. It might be difficult to get rid of the gold itself, but creating an alloy to change its nature is quite easy."

The crushing came to a stop.

After thoroughly crushing some of the aluminum window frame that Meslayate had broken, she had mixed in some of her own blood and let it dry. The end result was a brutal powder mixed with iron oxide.

She lightly waved her fingers by the closest wall like she was striking a match from an older age.

That was all.

The iron oxide and aluminum powder rapidly reacted.

And it did so with a temperature of more than 3000 degrees Celsius.

Fire as bright as welding enveloped Erika's entire right arm. Including the sleeve of her gothic lolita dress and black glove.

She showed no mercy.

A creature of the night wielding such a bright light was like the ultimate contradiction.

As Karen finally got to her feet, Erika's long skirt fluttered, her beautiful blonde ringlet curls swayed, and she made a charge with her burning arm. The light blurred like a car's tail lights. Karen raised her gold shield on reflex, but Erika was already swinging her glowing arm. It burned, melted, and gathered everything in the way as it flew toward Karen's shield like an avalanche. Gold melted at about 1000 degrees, so it was no defense.

Erika used the lockers and desks.

She gathered the iron, steel, stainless steel, and even plastic. She filled the liquefied gold with all sorts of materials to rob Karen's shield of its purity. Just like a coin given impurities to hide a recession, the gold was reduced to an inferior alloy that could no longer be called gold.

"!?"

Karen must have lost control of it and also found herself unable to avoid its heat. She sucked in a sharp gasp and dropped the scorching mass where it ignited the empty classroom's wooden flooring.

Erika tried to throw a right punch, but then she recalled her arm had become an uncontrollable torch.

So instead, she took a step to the side and whispered a name.

"Ayumi-chan."

Something shot forward.

The merciless impact scored a direct hit to the bridge of drugged Karen's nose.

## Part 4

Just one to go now.

At this point, there was nothing left to fear.

White feathers floated in the air. That man had borrowed the memories and knowledge of the goddess's Ti Bon Ange to wield a miracle, but it was obvious he had been stripped of that.

That man in a black suit, tie, and glasses was a Bokor belonging to the Voodoo Evil Spirit, the world's greatest black market.

...It was unclear what he could do on his own, but with Karen defeated, Erika, Ayumi, and the 13 Eastern European Families could focus on him. Surely there was no way the loss of Karen would somehow give him a power up.

I held my aching shoulder and trod on the white feathers as I stepped forward.

I took a step toward that gloomy man whose cane's head was a metal skull bent in a J-shape.

"I will be taking back the Class Rep."

"That will be a loss on the business side, but I suppose I should cut my losses here."

"No one's talking about business. I'm not negotiating and I'm going to crush Evil Spirit right here and now. I won't let you make a comeback and start selling away other people's lives again. Maxwell."

"Sure."

"Identify his mobile signal and hack the source. Find his secret address book and follow it back. We'll hand that list of names over to White Hacker Anastasia and have her wipe them all out."

“His obvious smartphone appears to be a bluff. His true devices are his GPS watch and card-sized digital camera. They are both easy to overlook as they communicate without a cellphone SIM card, but the maker leaves some garbage data at the end of the standard data packets. That would normally be a string of zeroes, but his are occasionally converted into a hexadecimal random number. It likely contains email data.”

When the world got too high-tech, mailers could be installed on devices without keyboards or pads. Pacemakers could be connected to the medical network and convenience store security cameras could be infected with a virus to send out lots of data as a DDoS base. Basically, phones and PCs were not the only digital crime tools, but you wouldn't overlook those if you knew what to look for.

The Bokor, whose glasses hid the dark bags below his eyes, slowly sighed.

“...We came here because we were wanted.”

“Sorry, but I'm not interested in majority rule justice. Don't you know who I am? I'm Amatsu Satori who gave into his anger and destroyed the Bright Cross which had its roots in more than 100 countries around the world.”

“We are supported by the general will of the people! You will never be rid of us so long as the world's people continue to desire our products!”

“I have acquired data concerning the Hidden Cloud from his secret address list,” said Maxwell. “It is likely a contact point that allows one to monitor its progress. Simply put, this can be used to locate and attack the computer that acted as the starting point of Evil Spirit and the Hidden Cloud as a whole.”

“That too was provided to fulfill a desire. More than a billion people question the gods. Including someone in your group here!!”

“Maxwell, begin the attack.”

“Can you truly trust the system? Didn't you just see a warrior maiden defeated by a mere human? How can you watch that and still call the rules set by the gods absolute!?”

“...That isn't for you to decide.”

I looked down at my smartphone.

I saw Maxwell's speech bubble there.

## Part 5

“Are you sure you want to completely destroy the Hidden Cloud composed of more than a billion people who wish to strike back at the gods? (yes or no)”



# **[crucial notice] The Fate of a Billion Accounts [on the pinup board]**

There is an oddity in the server system's traffic.

It has not triggered an alert.

This is no time for hesitation. It is enough that the system claims nothing is amiss when I have such good reason to suspect otherwise. My top priority is physically destroying the system and erasing all personal information leading back to me.

I do not have time or an obligation to worry about what happens to everyone who joined the Hidden Cloud. This will cause some confusion, but there is very little chance they will naturally gather back together. Unless someone leads them in that direction, they will likely shamelessly blend back into the very society they spat on.

I must withdraw from here, but this entire incident is a treasure trove. I will check back through everything that occurred here to learn from it all.

# Chapter 9

It was over.

Was it a testament to my resilience or my insensitivity that I could sum it up so easily after just a day had passed?

The Class Rep had never had her soul removed and those three morons had not had a falling out or been turned into a monster by the Bokor. ...Although I was worried what would happen if we simply let them go, so I did warn them I would show them hell the instant they tried anything.

Those girls were the perpetrators here, so I had no reason to go easy on them.

Karen either wasn't feeling well or couldn't bear to look me in the eye because she had been hiding under the covers trembling ever since. How could I know that without knowing her email address or where her hideout was, you ask?

"Satori-saaan. Can you bring me some pudding from the fridge?"

"Don't break into an injured person's house and then hog their bed! This is a teenage boy's bedroom, widow!!"

Then again, having her suddenly disappear would have been an even bigger problem, so I couldn't complain too much.

The 13 Eastern European Families had been a little more polite, so they had apparently escaped Japan when the time was right.

...The Hidden Cloud has roots everywhere. Even within this friendly group here.

Had the Evil Spirit Bokor been telling the truth, or had it been a curse using his words?

Whatever the case, it was afterschool.

My arm was in a sling as I walked to the harbor container yard where Maxwell was located.

“You could have received my support via smartphone instead of coming here, you know?”

“We’re talking about Anastasia here. Who knows what she’s going to try while pretending to cooperate. I want to be ready for anything.”

Yes, I had to contact that white hacker who was in America.

“Truth, I’m ready to give you a follow-up report.”

“Warning: During the span of that one sentence, I have detected and stopped 169 different forms of cyber-attack.”

“You wanted to know where the Hidden Cloud began, right?”

That 11-year-old Silky maid fairy had long blonde hair and wore a red silk dress. She may have been in a university lab because she was spinning around on a rolling chair.

“I took the data you gave me and sent it to the police as an anonymous report, but the SWAT team ended up at a junkyard on the outskirts of Detroit.”

“A junkyard?”

“You know, one of those places full of squashed and rusted cars.”

That didn’t seem like the place you would find precision machinery. I didn’t know the true amount if you accounted for people with multiple accounts, but that system had supported more than a trillion people. I had pictured something special like an entire warship or a jet’s modified airborne early-warning system.

“I do know that the Hidden Cloud itself was destroyed, so I can imagine the hardware was physically disposed of.”

“Yeah, I imagine so.”

“But what do you think that hardware was?” Anastasia kept her voice low on the phone. “Calculators, pedometers, car navigation systems, voice recorders,

portable CD players, PDAs, electronic dictionaries, digital thermometers, wristwatches...”

“Hold on, Anastasia. What are you talking about?”

“I’m not joking. It really was just a bunch of junk stacked up in enough of a pile to pierce the heavens. You could call it a mountain of the trash that had its place in the world usurped by smartphones.”

“...”

“Someone had gone to the trouble of hooking them all up in parallel to secure their processing power. That was the true identity of the Hidden Cloud. Maybe it was meant as a form of irony or a way of displaying their beliefs.”

A collection of abandoned machinery.

Each individual piece was harmless, but that changed entirely when they gathered into a single giant system.

“The production regions and eras were all different. It looks like that Evil Spirit group dug through reclaimed land around the world to collect all the electronic junk and then sent it all to someone.”

This reminded me of something.

Yes, none of this was that special. Not for me, anyway.

“It’s the same as Maxwell. I didn’t use chips developed for use in a simulator. I hooked together 1400 defective mobile game systems that were sold for almost nothing and remade them into a disaster environment simulator.”

Of course, the original development company and manufacturing plant had never planned for that. Maxwell had left those original creators’ control and had been remade into a simulator by me.

This almost felt like some sort of revenge.

No, was it meant as a message that only I would recognize?

“Truth, just like you breathed new life into machinery meant to be disposed of, whoever-this-is may have given meaning to all those usable-but-unwanted tools by having them support the billion accounts of the Hidden Cloud that has

no beginning or end.”

“Hold on. Then what was this data scientist trying to accomplish? Does this mean the Hidden Cloud and its attack on the gods didn’t really matter?”

“It may have been meant as a benchmark test.” Anastasia seemed to be choosing her words carefully. “The data scientist may have only been interested in how deeply their processing system could work its way into the center of the world. Perhaps revenge against the gods was nothing more than an obvious goal and they just wanted to accomplish something that would force the world to respect them.”

The Evil Spirit black market had been destroyed.

The Hidden Cloud’s never-ending circle had been broken and it had fallen apart.

But.

It still wasn’t over.

“So to them, the Hidden Cloud and its billion accounts were no more than a test,” I said.

“If so, the data scientist will keep going. Until their creation is recognized by the world. And they are apparently willing to trigger the Calamity in the process.”

Revenge against the gods had been just one method of proving themselves.

That had failed, but they would just try another idea now. Like someone starting to draw with a red crayon, not liking how it looked, and switching to a yellow one.

What would happen?

What accomplishment would rival the Calamity, that manmade disaster which would destroy the human race? I couldn’t even imagine in which direction to focus our defenses.

“The data scientist will begin something else soon,” said Anastasia. “No, they may have already begun on their next plan.”

“...”

“Never let your guard down. You need to be ready. ...I guess that’s the takeaway from this.”

## [crucial notice] Conclusion [on the pinup board]

This is what truly scares me.

The ability to suppress overwhelming influence, near-unlimited wealth, direct combat ability on the level of a natural disaster, and the infectiousness of an Archenemy. Those with great power hate losing their power because they know just how painful it was to gather it. Holding back is simple. There are countless methods: negotiation, threats, persuasion, compromise, *etc.*

But he alone is different.

If you include the Bright Cross as a previous example, I find it hard to believe this was a simple coincidence.

Amatsu Satori.

The massive Hidden Cloud and its more than one billion accounts were lost, but perhaps that was a small price to pay for reaching a conclusion on him.

He is a destroyer.

If he feels it is the right thing to do and can protect the people close to him, he will not hesitate to destroy even humanity's history and civilization.

I am registering him as a top priority individual: an Over Enemy.

I must recalculate his influence on the plan.

**[crucial notice] Save Command [on the pinup board]**

The individual and data interaction chart has been changed.

Would you like to save the current version? (Y/N)



# Chapter 10

Creation is a job for the gods.

We can only come up with limitless ideas within the elements given to us. We must not conceitedly claim we can create any and all colors with the three primary colors of RGB. That also means we must always use those three colors no matter what we do. We can only use what was prepared for us ahead of time. We are not allowed to add a fourth primary color into the mix. Such a safe and oppressive freedom.

...I thought I might be able to accomplish such an absurd dream if I took revenge against the gods in heaven, stripped them of their vessel of flesh, and placed my own soul within it, but, well, no use crying over spilt milk.

I must move on.

There is much I want to do. I have yet to test even a tenth of this prison. I can think of so much I want to do and test. If I am not careful, I fear I will lose focus and abandon my own plan. That is how vast this world is, but surprisingly few people have realized its value.

So few people have realized this world is a prison.

Perhaps that is because it is so vast that no one can see the walls and bars at the farthest reaches.

In most mythologies, the gods live somewhere cut off from the human world. Reaching that place is often the ultimate objective given to humanity. And needless to say, the world was supposedly created by the gods, yet it is so full of suffering. To the point that being exiled from the home of the gods is sometimes used as a form of punishment.

Will you accept that as long as you feel free?

Is it not a problem for you as long as you are comfortable?

Not so for me. I feel otherwise. So I will gather everything I can and use it as a weapon. Everything in this prison has value. A single wire can be used to unlock a door. Sharpen the end of a chopstick and it becomes a weapon. That is how I have made my attempts. So very many attempts. The Hidden Cloud made a fair amount of progress, but that method would never work. So I must reassess the prison's overall diagram and find a different route to the exit.

Yes.

I wish to stage a jailbreak.

I have no interest in original sin. Matters of good and evil are of no concern to me. Just like all other selfish jailbreakers, I simply cannot bear the oppression of this comfortable cage.

# Afterword

That was My Vampire Older Sister and Zombie Little Sister. This was the 7th volume, I believe.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This time, I went back to the basics and focused on Zombies and Vampires. I wanted to compare the consequence-free rampage in the simulator in Volume 1 to a real battle that has to be cleaned up afterwards, so you may be able to see the line between the dreams and realities of Archenemies.

The term “curse” is used at the core of Vampires and in Voodoo from which Zombies come. It is also important to note that perfectly normal high school girls misused a curse at the start of the volume. That one word covers so many different things that, unlike with something like modern Western magic, you can see both experts and amateurs using them. But if the occult really did exist, that lack of management would be kind scary, wouldn't it?

With Volume 3, Volume 4, and this volume, the Class Rep does get knocked out quite a lot, doesn't she? But for some reason, that doesn't make her seem at all weak or frail, so she is a strange character. Something about her seems different even when compared to Anastasia from Volume 4 or Amatsu Yurina from Volume 5. This mysterious comfort seen around the Class Rep is something that appeared by complete coincidence as I wrote more volumes, so I will be focusing on and analyzing that in the future. ...Are childhood friends simply made that way?

Speaking of old acquaintances, Maxwell seems to be growing too. I feel like it isn't long before that simulator is speaking in nothing but emoji and pictures. I hope you find it cute how she mocks Satori so much yet still executes the

swimsuit dance file when he wants it.

I give my thanks to the image illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Anan-san, Onodera-san, Nakajima-san, Kishigami-san, Mitera-san, and Yamamoto-san. This series has gotten enough characters that now I have to pick and choose which ones to use where and I think it only reached this point because of all the help I have had. The many character roughs gave me lots of ideas. Thank you yet again.

And I give my thanks to the readers. Seven volumes is a significant amount of text and I think it is thanks to all of your support that I was able to write all of that. I am giving it a home in a bit of a different field from normal light novels, but nothing would make me happier than your continued support.

And I will end this here.

You can tell this series has grown because the Bright Cross is starting to sound nostalgic.

-Kamachi Kazuma